

Scotland's Housing Network (SHN): Welfare Reform Forum Report – Oct/Nov 2021

This report outlines the main points from the recent round of SHN welfare reform events held in late October and early November 2021. Approximately 100 people attended the three 'virtual' events. The events are chaired and facilitated by Tony Donohoe, SHN Associate and can be contacted at <mailto:info@tonyconsulting.co.uk>. All available presentations from the forum can be found at: <http://www.scotlandshousingnetwork.org/welfare-reform/> and are now also available on the Welfare Reform Channel hosted by the SHN through Microsoft Teams.

Event Dates	Speakers	Agenda Topic	Presentation Available
East Forum – 26/10/21	Tony Donohoe – SHN	Welcome & Programme	Y
	Lynn McAteer & Andrew Weir - DWP	Universal Credit Updates	Y
West Forum – 28/10/21	Tony Donohoe – SHN	Welcome & Programme	Y
	Lynn McAteer & Andrew Weir - DWP	Universal Credit Updates	Y
North Forum – 04/11/21	Tony Donohoe – SHN	Welcome & programme	Y
	Lynn McAteer & Andrew Weir - DWP	Universal Credit Updates	Y
	Leigh Sneddon - Scottish Government	Housing & Welfare Reform Updates	Y

Resource	Contact/Resource Material	Further Information/Website Links/Email
Scotland's Housing Network	info@tonyconsulting.co.uk (Tony Donohoe) Fiona.Jackson@scotlandshousingnetwork.org (Fiona Jackson)	http://www.scotlandshousingnetwork.org/welfare-reform/ http://www.welfarereformscotland.co.uk/
Scottish Federation of Housing Associations	New Contact to Be Confirmed.	https://www.sfha.co.uk/sub-category/welfare-reform https://www.sfha.co.uk/mediaLibrary/other/english/63049.pdf?utm_source=SFHA+Master+List&utm_campaign=72afcae2c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_10_01_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_44c46ded14-72afcae2c-401812107 (link to Social Housing Resilience Group "Guide to Restarting Services", June 2020 for services paused during COVID-19)
Social Housing & Welfare (SHAW) Bulletin	Catherine.Louch@prospectch.org.uk (Catherine Louch)	Email Catherine Louch at Prospect Housing to be added to Bulletin circulation list.
Department of Work & Pensions	Universal Credit Landlord Guidance Page	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-rented-housing--2
	DWP 'Universal Credit Landlord Engagement Newsletter'	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-landlord-engagement-newsletters
	'Mixed Age Couples' Guidance	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-benefit-adjudication-circulars-2019/a92019-mixed-age-couples-further-guidance
	DWP Universal Credit Official Statistics (UC numbers by geography, jobcentre etc)	http://dwp-stats.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=f90fb305d8da4eb3970812b3199cf489
	Lynn McAteer – DWP Scotland Customer Experience Manager	Lynn.McAteer@dwp.gov.uk
	Andrew Weir – DWP Advanced Customer Support Senior Leader	ANDREW.WEIR@DWP.GOV.UK

Resource	Contact/Resource Material	Further Information/Website Links/Email
Scottish Government	Poverty & Income Inequality Statistics	https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Social-Welfare
	Universal Credit Scotland Dashboard published by Scottish Government – Scottish Statistics on Universal Credit (DWP-based)	Universal Credit Scotland dashboard 2021 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
	Scottish Government Coronavirus COVID-19 Guidance – Housing	https://www.gov.scot/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance/#housing
	Scottish Government Discretionary Housing Payments in Scotland: 1 April 2020 to 31st March 2021 – DHP stats for financial year 2020/21	https://www.gov.scot/publications/discretionary-housing-payments-in-scotland-1-april-2020-to-31-march-2021/
	Leigh Sneddon – Housing Affordability Policy Manager	Leigh.Sneddon@gov.scot

Main Presentation Topics & Key Points Discussed

Topic	Presentation/Discussion Points
Introduction & SHN Updates	<p>Tony updated on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future forums – Unfortunately no move towards reinstating face to face forums at the moment given the Scottish Government Guidance remains unchanged in terms of encouraging people to continue to work at home. We will consider the situation for the next round of forums in February 2022 but likely to be online again. • Main policy change on Universal Credit the ending of the temporary £20/week additional UC allowance for all claimants due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. • Tony outlined some information from SG on Tenant Hardship Loan Fund applications. There followed discussion about the new Tenant Hardship Grant Fund that the Scottish Government has introduced and to be administered by LAs. The Scottish Government allocation award letter to LAs and Guidance for the scheme have now been published on our MS Teams Welfare Reform Channel. • Most recent statistics on UC for UK & Scotland summarised from two main publications/sources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 9 September 2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) ○ Universal Credit Scotland dashboard 2021 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) • In UK 5.836m people on UC as at 09/09/21 with 38% of these in employment. Over the period August 2020-August 2021 the UC caseload increased in 23 LA areas in Scotland – a combination of the impact of Coronavirus on the economy and the ‘natural migration’ of people from Legacy Benefits.
Universal Credit Updates (DWP) – Lynn McAteer & Andrew Weir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational Delivery – Customer access to Jobcentres has been reinstated with face to face appointments as well as digital routes of contact. Some staff on-site and others working from home. Prison work coaches now back in 8 out of 15 prisons across Scotland with aim to have them all back by 8th November. • Andrew outlined the role and remit of the Advanced Customer Support Teams in DWP – broadly to identify and support the most vulnerable clients across all DWP administered benefits or product lines (not just UC) working in partnership with other agencies where appropriate. Referrals can come from both internal and external routes including landlords. • DWP emphasised the removal of the temporary £20/week UC allowance uplift and have communicated with all claimants on this since summer 2021. Focus now on supporting people back into work with 13,500 new Work Coaches employed. • UK Government announced £500m Support Fund for vulnerable households with Scottish Government receiving £41m of this with full power over how to spend it. Flexible Support Fund also boosted by £150m to provide localised and tailored employment support. • Minor improvement to Landlord Portal in that ‘closure of claim pending’ will be added where appropriate in the Claim Status field.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To stop Third Party Deductions landlords should phone UC number 0800 – 328 – 5644 although some landlords reported using email for this. Emphasised that 1st port of call for escalation of UC issues is the landlords’ Local Partnership Manager. DWP will provide updated contact details for this and SHN will circulate to all forum members. • ‘Move to UC’ – discussions with Ministers to restart the programme with aspiration to move all those from the 6 existing benefits to UC by end of 2024. <p>Some points made by landlords with DWP summarised below (the main specific points/questions in Annex 1 of this report extracted from the on-line discussion at each forum):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Overpayments and resolving these an ongoing issue for landlords. b) Landlords still reporting that in some cases new tenants housing costs are being paid to the previous landlord. c) The UC Limited Capability for Work Assessment is not being triggered by DWP staff within the recognised timescale – appears to be a process compliance issue. DWP looking at revisiting “Housing Confident” training for staff. d) The length of time on phone calls to DWP for landlords to stop TPDS – landlords looking for more efficient route to stop and communicate over issues such as TPDs? e) Some landlords reporting a breakdown in operation of escalation routes in last year or so.
<p>Housing & Welfare Reform in Scotland (Scottish Government) – Leigh Sneddon (North Forum only on 04/11)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness – still key priority for SG to end homelessness. Moratorium on evictions expected to continue until at least March 2022. • Tenant Hardship Loan Fund still in operation and now supplemented by Tenant Hardship Grant Fund of £10m announced in June 2021. The Grant Fund to cover COVID related rent arrears for tenants will be administered by LAs and they are currently working up the detail of how their schemes will operate. The Scottish Government has issued letter to LAs with financial allocation for 2021/22 as well as Guidance for LAs. <i>Post Meeting Note - the allocation letter issued by the SG to LAs and guidance for LAs has now been published on our MS Teams Welfare Reform Channel.</i> • Scottish Government is introducing a new £41m Winter Support Fund (Scottish allocation of the UK Govt £500m) for low-income households. The detail on how the scheme will operate being worked up at moment but split between £10m fuel poverty, £25m for LAs ‘wellbeing fund’ and £6m for Third Sector organisations. • Scottish Government still working up proposals with the DWP on split payment policy for Universal Credit. <p>The main point of discussion from landlords was around the new Tenant Hardship Grant Fund with some points made about publicising it to housing associations. Further discussion on the key features of the Scheme – such as strong focus on preventing homelessness, only applies to arrears over period 23/03/20 – 09/08/22 of COVID crisis and for both private and social rented tenants.</p>
<p>SHN WR Forums (next dates)</p>	<p>East (Edinburgh) - Tuesday 15th February 2022; West (Glasgow) - Thursday 17th February 2022; North (Inverness) - Thursday 24th February 2022.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Tony Donohoe, November 2021</p>

Annex 1

Questions/Comments Posted on Teams from Forum Participants – October/November 2021		
East Forum 26/10/21	West Forum 28/10/21	North Forum 04/11/21
We normally email UC service centre to stop deductions should this be phone instead or still both routes?	Was a welcome improvement to update HC however rent increase process info comes out too late each year. Normally our letters have went out to tenants.	Should councils be contacting Housing Associations re: Tenant Grant?
Struggling with multiple residents receiving overpayments. How do we pay these back?	We have to give tenants notice of changes to their rent so we really need the info by mid Feb.	Are there any plans to look at Tenants and their preferred method of contact since things have changed due to COVID
In Edinburgh our overpayments are not being repaid to DWP as we are not receiving correct communications to allow us to repay. Difficult as landlords know of many more overpayments than we ever get requested for back. In Edinburgh we are trying to get a project underway to resolve this huge issue. Many rent accounts are not accurate in credit and should be in arrears. Plan is to have separate accounts to hold monies. until requests received?? Covid may have had an impact as letters LC2 from debt management can end up in many places across the council?	We have had an increase in the number of requests direct from UC case managers and tenants for their tenancy reference number even although it has been stated on SRS via portal. Has an update been made to the system where cases managers are unable to see this from SRS? Same for us. We also see MPTL for tenants on the portal being paid via 4-weekly schedule. Case manager doesn't know what I'm talking about, and escalation was the same! I'm hoping it's less experienced staff and it will settle down fingers crossed	
NAC are adapting our current financial hardship DHP form for tenants to apply for this grant fund as very similar questions need to be answered for the grant to be awarded (<i>reference to Scottish Government Tenant Hardship Grant</i>).	We have also noticed requested for tenancy ref numbers despite this information having already been provided. Overpayment recovery is a problem for us as well - we have overpayments dating back to 2019 that we have repeatedly asked (& escalated) DWP to recover but are still outstanding.	
Contacted Fife Council re the grant fund a month ago. At that time they were unable to say how it could be accessed or even who within the council would be dealing with any enquiries. Although you do not have to apply, in practice, as is being stated, there is an "application process! (<i>reference to Scottish Government Tenant Hardship Grant</i>).	Overpayment recoveries also an issue with River Clyde Homes, invoices to pay back to UC either take forever to come or don't come at all.	
Edinburgh has a big problem rent free weeks changed to 0 from 6/4/20. Council policy change and as Jackie stated no ability to change?... speaking to partnership manager and service centre as to how we can prompt tenants to report changes to rent free weeks.	Surely anyone tempted to 'fiddle' their rent increase should be having other aspects of their claim examined? I can't imagine the numbers would be sufficiently high to justify the secrecy around the tolerance.	
	It also doesn't seem to prevent it as we have to report a number of overpayments every year following the rent increase as some tenant's report the wrong rent charge.	

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	Overpayments are also an issue for us. You either get something to advise you are overpaid but then get nothing through for repayment or you get the request for payment from debt mgt with the letter advising you have previously been notified of the o/p but we haven't had that notification through.	
	The blame for the delay in the invoice seems to lie with the huge Debt Management team backlog, we get the notifications readily enough from the case managers.	
	We also have problems with unidentified payments - received both through the schedule and on the portal. The ones on the portal are easier to resolve as we have the name/address of the claimant so can contact UC enquiries. However, those on the portal are very difficult to resolve. Luckily, our partnership manager has been very helpful when we escalate the issues. However, it is a problem to get the overpayment recovered. *meant to say schedule not portal for those difficult to resolve	
	Feedback from the types of cases that Andrew (DWP) and his colleagues deal with would be good for future sessions. We have had to utilise this assistance on a number of instances and the results they have been able to achieve are fantastic. Dumfries and Galloway Council is up and running with the Tenant Grant Fund and we have had some payments granted for DGHP tenants.	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant info from East Ayrshire Council was quick to come out, and thorough • really interested in this as loans were not of interest to our tenants but a grant is more appealing • Can the toolkit be shared so we can start with trying to help tenants even if the LA's have not published their own processes yet? <p>(all references to <i>Scottish Government Tenant Hardship Grant</i>).</p>	