



ADVICE TEAM AND TENANCY SUPPORT POLICY

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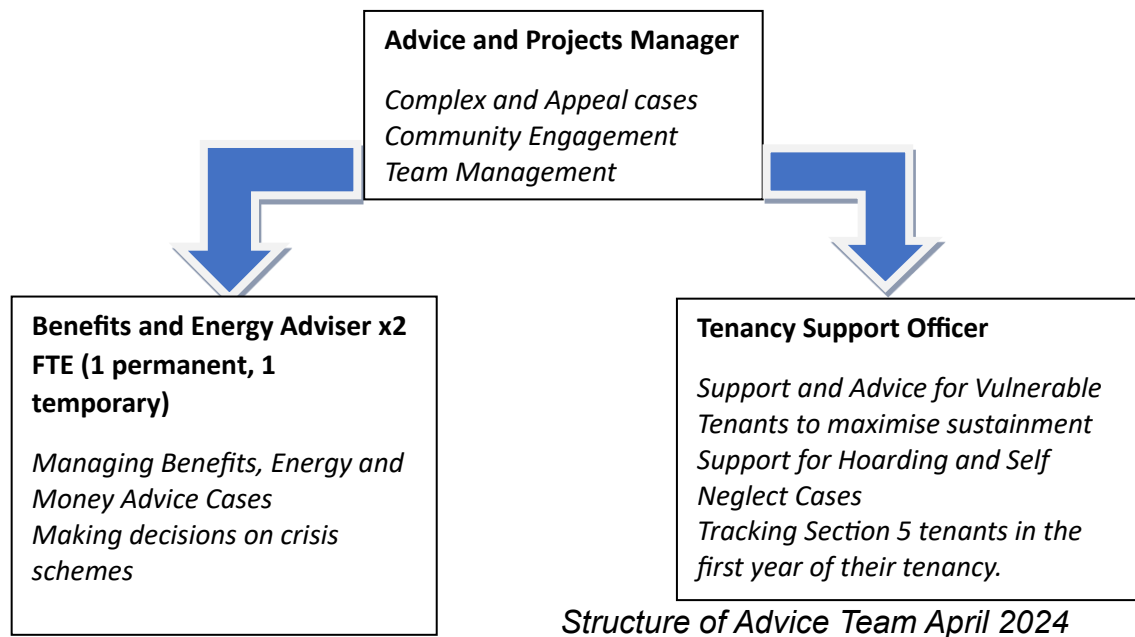
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ADVICE TEAM AND TENANCY SUPPORT POLICY

1. Service Provision

The Association recognises that sometimes tenants will require additional support within their tenancy. To this end we provide a holistic advice service to provide tenants with the support that they need to sustain their tenancy and to maximise their wellbeing and quality of life.

The Structure of our advice provision and areas of responsibility are highlighted below:



The intent of this structure is to work across all areas of provision to provide tenants with the support that they need in their tenancy.

2. Rationale

The cost of a failed tenancy results in direct costs to the Association and broader costs across other services such as Health and Social Care and Homeless Services. Shelter Scotland (2021) ¹ estimate that the cost of each eviction to an RSL is around £12,000, with the wider cost across all statutory services being £34,000.

By maximising the level of tenancy sustainment, we will directly impact the spend of the association by reducing the turnover of tenancies and reduce the burden on essential services as a whole.

It is our opinion that providing a holistic advice service, which helps people and resolves issues that impact their ability remain in their homes, has a direct positive benefit to the Association, our tenants and the wider community.

1. [Shelter Scotland \(2021\) Understanding the true cost of evictions in scotland](#)

Of our tenants 40% claim Universal Credit with 20% claiming Housing Benefit indicating that a significant proportion of the Association's revenue is dependent, in full or in part, on Social Security payments.

Primary legislation, The Welfare Reform Act 2012, and numerous secondary legislation including the Universal Credit Regulations 2013, provided the foundation for Welfare Reform which posed a significant risk to the Association. While the impact of Welfare Reform has been mitigated by flexibilities exercised by the Scottish Government, there is still an impact. Our Advice services play a part in our management of this.

The Association also recognises that our tenants can be impacted by factors in the general economy and society. Such as inflation, addiction or recession, this can impact a tenant's ability to manage their tenancy and deal with other priority bills in particular: Gas, Electricity and Council Tax. Therefore, we have taken a broader Financial and Social Inclusion approach to our advice provision.

3. Consent and Terms of Service

Where a tenant engages with the Advice Team, such engagement will be voluntary on the part of the tenant. At the first point of engagement the tenant will give verbal consent to participate, which will be noted on the Advice Pro IT system. Where continuing engagement is required, all reasonable attempts will be made to gain written consent.

At the first point of any ongoing engagement the tenant will be issued with a Terms of Service document by email (or letter where this is not available) highlighting the responsibilities of both the tenant and the Association.

4. Benefits Advice

Our service provides comprehensive, specialist advice on all Social Security benefits and payments which are administered by DWP, Social Security Scotland, HMRC and Renfrewshire Council. This advice includes representation up to and including Upper Tier Tribunal for Appeals and pre-action for Judicial Review. Any level above this would require representation from a solicitor specialising in Social Security.

The service will assist tenants, and household members, to identify unclaimed benefits. Where a benefit is identified the service can assist them to submit a claim, lodge any request for a Reconsideration or Appeal to an independent tribunal.

The client (tenant or household member) will retain responsibility for the provision of any additional evidence.

The service will monitor performance based on number of distinct cases dealt with and financial gains, backdated and predicted annual gains.

5. Energy Advice

In order for our tenants to make their property a home we recognise that it is important to maximise their ability to pay for Gas and Electricity to ensure that they

have a warm and welcoming home. On this basis we provide an energy advice service.

This service seeks to empower tenants to take control of their utilities by; better understanding their bills and usage; dealing with energy debt; and making behavioural changes to reduce their expenditure.

This advice can involve making applications to grants to deal with energy debt, switching providers to ensure that tenants are on the best tariff. This will always be carried out with the consent of the client to ensure transparency.

The client will, at all times, retain responsibility for payment of their bills.

6. Money Advice

The Association has previously provided a Money Advice Service, in partnership with, Renfrewshire Citizens Advice. We found that there was a low demand for this service as client's were reluctant to fully disclose the extent of any debt problem.

As such we have made the decision to operate a limited Money Advice service inhouse. This service will assist tenants to: develop budget plans, deal with single priority debt issues and reduce deductions that may be impacting upon Social Security benefits.

This may also involve applying for charitable grants for essential items or to assist with rent arrears.

If a client requires assistance in excess of the level of this service they will be provided with signposting advice directing them to free debt advice organisations.

7. Tenancy Support

Our Tenancy Support service is designed to give intensive support, where required, to vulnerable tenants in the first year of their tenancy to maximise tenancy sustainment. It is also designed to support tenants who are at risk of losing their tenancy to resolve issues that may be impacting on their ability to remain in their tenancy.

The support offered is voluntary and carried out, at all times, with the consent of the tenant.

The service is designed to give support and guidance in maintaining a tenancy and to link with other external services and agencies; such as Primary Care, Community Mental Health, Occupational Therapy, Homeless Services, Housing Support and Health and Social Care Partnership. This is to ensure that a vulnerable tenant, or tenant at risk of losing their tenancy, receives the best chance of building a successful tenancy.

This service will also work with the tenant to assist them in furnishing their property, making use of internal and external resources.

8. Hoarding and Self Neglect

Supporting tenants to deal with Hoarding and Self Neglect will fall within the remit of our Tenancy Support service. Further details on the support provided can be found within the Association's Hoarding and Self Neglect Policy and Procedures.

9. Domestic Abuse, Adult Protection and Child Protection

Where a tenant, or household member, is suspected of being at risk of Domestic Abuse or that there is risk of harm. The Tenancy Support service can provide advice and support in addressing the risk and to access external services which can support in the mitigation of the risk.

10. Crisis Schemes

The Association is committed to supporting our tenants, who find themselves in hardship or crisis, we will attempt to access external funding to secure ongoing crisis schemes.

Priority for these schemes will be given to addressing poverty and hardship, particularly Fuel Poverty.

These schemes will be operated in line with any restrictions from funders and to ensure that any support is targeted to the areas where it will have the greatest amount of benefit.

Administration of these schemes will fall within the remit of the Advice Team to manage and make awards.

Attempts will be made to use any awards from available crisis schemes to maximise uptake of our services.

11. Uptake campaigns

At periodic intervals the Advice Team will run uptake campaigns for certain groups. These could target specific issues such as School Clothing Grant, Warm Home Discount or Scottish Child Payment. Or specific groups which are known to underclaim benefits, such as pensioners.

12. Training and Development

The Advice Team has a distinct role within the Association, which often requires non-Housing specific training.

The Advice Team will identify any specific training needs to ensure that it retains the necessary skills and expertise to deliver the level of service required. The training needs of particular staff will be gathered through case reviews, regular 1 to 1 meetings with the Advice and Projects Manager and through the Association's Appraisal process.

Appropriate Advice Team staff may represent the Association on appropriate forums as required.

13. Working with colleagues

The Advice Team is designed to complement existing services within the Association, as such it will work with colleagues across the business, such as Housing Officers, Asset Officers or staff involved with Allocations, to maximise uptake of services.

It is also recognised that contractors will also be involved with our tenants, in some cases more than Association staff, it is our intent to develop a referral pathway for contractors to make referrals directly for advice and support if they identify any risk.

14. Representation

Part of the role of the Advice Team is to achieve outcomes that a client may be unable to achieve without assistance. A key example of this is challenging decisions that have been made by a relevant agency or authority.

This could take the form of:

- Social Security Mandatory Reconsideration and Appeals
- Reviews of Social Security decisions which do not hold specific rights of appeal/reconsideration.
- Complaints to Ombudsman or Regulators (such as OFGEM or Parliamentary Services Ombudsman)
- Letter of pre-action for Judicial Review

The Advice Team will recuse itself from representation where there is a conflict of interest with the Association or where the Association may be a target for recovery (e.g. certain benefit overpayment decisions).

In certain circumstances, the Association may elect to withdraw representation. Representation may only be withdrawn as a last resort and only in certain circumstances. Reasons for the withdrawal of representation are:

- Where a tenant has made a material misrepresentation.
- Where a tenant does not provide evidence which could reasonably be required.
- Where the case does not hold a reasonable chance of success.
- Where there is an unresolvable difference between the action that a tenant wishes to pursue and that which the service suggests.

This list is not exhaustive.

15. Complaints

The service operates under the Association's Complaints Policy and complies with the process and timescales outlined in that policy and procedure.

- Stage 1 complaints can be dealt with by the Benefits and Energy Advisers or Tenancy Support Officer
- Stage 2 complaints will be dealt with by the Advice and Projects Manager.

16. Escalation procedures

For Benefits, Money and Energy Advice cases in general most cases can be dealt with by the Benefits and Energy Adviser. Complex cases can be referred to the Advice and Projects Manager. The threshold where a case will be complex is variable and could happen at any point within the case. Triggers that indicate a requirement for the Advice and Projects Manager to be involved in the case are:

- A benefits advice case that reaches appeal stage.
- A benefits advice case that involves a complex approach involving legislation or caselaw.
- An Energy Advice case that has reached an Ombudsman complaint.
- A case that involves a risk of a client losing their tenancy.
- A stage 2 complaint has been made.

17. Performance and Evaluation

In terms of monitoring and evaluation the APM will track performance on a quarterly basis, with annual reports being made to the Association's board.

The following metrics will be used:

All case types	Benefits/Energy cases	Tenancy Support
Number of new clients	One off financial gains	Case studies
Number of new cases	Annual financial gains	Tenancies sustained more than 1 year
	Benefit appeals success rate	

18. Welfare Reform

A key function of the Advice Team is to ensure that the association is prepared for any Welfare Reforms that pose a financial risk to the association or its tenants.

- The Advice Team will maintain networks between other local advice agencies, in particular Adviceworks, CAB and other HA Welfare Rights staff;
- The Advice Team will attend where practicable and contribute to Liaison meetings with Renfrewshire Council, DWP/Jobcentre Plus and the Tribunal Service;
- Training will be provided to staff by the APM to prepare staff for any Welfare Reforms;
- Tenant data will be analysed in light of any proposed reforms to identify at risk groups and analyse the risk;
- Legislation and guidance on proposed reforms will be provided to managers and cascaded to staff as appropriate.

19. Data Protection

Paisley HA Advice Team complies with the General Data Protection Regulations 2016, as outlined in the Association's Data Protection Policy. All data and information held on clients is stored securely on the Association's IT systems, namely CX, Advice Pro and One Drive.

20. Confidentiality and Privacy

Paisley HA Advice Team operates on the principle of being free, impartial and confidential. No information will be shared outwith the Association unless:

- The service user consents to the sharing of information with contractors or external agencies.
- The service user provides written consent to discuss their case with a third party.
- The Association has reasonable concerns about the safety of the individual (or others) in line with the Association's Adult Protection Procedures.

21. Equalities

The Advice Team will comply with duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and the Association's Equality and Diversity Policy. In doing this we will:

- Ensure that equitable access is given to clients to benefit from the service.
- Equalities data is recorded on Advice Pro for people accessing the service, this data will be included in the Annual Reporting for the service.

22. Accessibility

Part of the essential function of the Advice Team is to engage with tenants, we strive to meet the accessibility requirements of our tenants and other service users. In order to achieve this we offer:

- Telephone interpreting service which can be used at all appointment types (office appointments, home visits and telephone)
- Office appointments in an accessible ground floor room
- Home visits (where appropriate)

Where appropriate and consent is given, we will also engage with relevant third parties such as appointees, power of attorney and advocates.

23. Stakeholder engagement and External Collaboration

The service has built up networks with other agencies that can support the delivery of the service as a whole. These include but are not limited to Renfrewshire Council, DWP, GP surgeries, Renfrewshire CAB, Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership and National Organisations such as Energy Action Scotland, CPAG and Advice UK.

Where a working partnership exists these will be governed by individual agreements between all parties.

We also have local networks in place with other Housing Associations to share best practice and information.

We will continue to maintain these networks and identify further networks which can benefit service development.

Where appropriate we will develop robust partnership and referral arrangements to the overall benefit of the service.

24. Feedback

The Association carries out a Tenant Satisfaction Survey every 3 years, the next falling due in 2025. In this satisfaction survey, tenants will be consulted on their experience of using the service and for any suggestions on improving the service received.

Further satisfaction surveys will be carried out on an ad hoc basis, as required.