



EDINBURGH TENANTS
FEDERATION

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Edinburgh's Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations

Edinburgh Tenants Federation

Feedback Report on City of Edinburgh Council Housing Budget Consultation



Edinburgh Tenants Federation Norton Park 57 Albion Road Edinburgh EH7 5QY

☎ 0131 475 2509 ✉ info@edinburghtenants.org.uk 🌐 www.edinburghtenants.org.uk

Edinburgh Tenants Federation is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) SC048236,
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1.0 Background

Edinburgh Tenants Federation (ETF) is the umbrella organisation for tenants' and residents' groups in the city of Edinburgh and a Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO).

Our purpose is to represent tenants at a citywide policy level and we aim to promote the improvement of the quality of life of residents and the housing conditions of all tenants.

2.0 Introduction

In working to achieve our aims and objectives of supporting the development of tenant participation and influence, ETF works in partnership with the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) to ensure continued tenant influence in the development and implementation of CEC's Housing Budget Consultation.

At our Federation Meeting, held on Wednesday 20th November 2019, ETF members discussed:

- 1) CEC's plans for building new homes, making current homes more modern and easier to heat;
- 2) Rents and CEC's proposals to change how often tenants' pay rent;
- 3) Ways in which CEC can improve their service to tenants.

Nineteen delegates, including representatives of seven RTOs' participated in group discussions relating to CEC's Housing Budget Consultation and the feedback has been grouped into themes where possible.

3.0 ETF members' comments

- 3.1 *We've been building new homes and making our existing homes more modern and easier to heat; and we've kept rent increases below inflation at 2% (around £2.08) over the last three years. What do you think of the plan and what we've done so far?*

Homes

- Some tenants were supposed to have new Kitchens and Bathrooms installed last year. This has not happened and many tenants are not being kept informed on the status of improvement works;
- Homes are better to heat to a certain extent;
- Some tenants who live in older properties find them difficult to heat because of bad insulation and draughts.

Building homes

- CEC is not building the houses that are required, fast enough. The demand for one and two bedroom homes and accessible homes for tenants with disabilities, shows these are needed now;
- CEC started a five year plan in 2014 where it was stated at least 10,000 new homes for CEC tenants would be built. However the quota has not been met! As tenant representatives, we seek clarification on why is this?
- New builds are needed now to house people on CEC's waiting list;
- CEC should look to build to passivhaus standard. (Passivhaus is a voluntary standard for energy efficiency in a building, which reduces the building's ecological footprint. It results in ultra-low energy buildings that require little energy for space heating or cooling.)

Housing needs

- Lack of inter-departmental co-operation to provide needed infrastructure (schools, buses, GPs) to make new housing good to live in;
- It is important that CEC build houses with a good infrastructure e.g. schools, public transport and doctors surgeries nearby.

Social rented homes

- Not enough social rented houses are being built.

Mid-Market Rents

- Too many mid-market rent homes are being built and not enough social rented homes;
- Most of the new builds are mid-market with income restrictions. Also clarification required re those in receipt of housing benefit should they be in mid-market housing and lose employment.

Communication

ETF members consider that communication between CEC staff and tenants is not always of the high standard it should be. Points raised in discussion groups and responses included:

- Communication between CEC staff and tenants is a key issue and very often housing staff are not communicating with tenants who have raised queries;
- Tenants often find they are waiting too long for a response;
- The issue of rent increases should be a matter for CEC's Rent Matters Working Group at the beginning of next year's consultation. Tenants need a better understanding of how rents and budgets are set and monitored. In future rent consultations there should be more options about possible rent increases.

Rents

- CEC's rents are not affordable as tenants living in Edinburgh pay the highest rents in Scotland. (The Scottish Government paper 'Rent Affordability in the Affordable Housing Sector: Literature Review' indicated that the actual weekly rent for tenants living in Edinburgh in 2017-18 was approximately £96, whereas in North Lanarkshire it was just over £60 and in South Lanarkshire it was approximately £65);
- Tenants need to be able to afford to live in their homes;
- CEC is building houses which tenants can't afford to live in as the rents are too high;
- Many tenants are on an income, but can't afford to pay their rent;
- CEC rents are still too high in areas, especially those with no amenities and bus services locally.

Repairs and Maintenance

- Trying to report repairs through CEC's Repairs Contact Centre can be a problem as tenants are waiting on the phone for long periods of time;
- CEC should have their own staff and not use outside contractors for repairs;
- Repairs in tenants' homes are often not carried out to an acceptable standard;
- If follow up repairs are needed in homes, some tenants wait for a long time for them to be carried out as certain repair parts are not available;
- Poor maintenance results in poor health of residents.

Shared repairs

- Shared repairs – how are CEC getting owners to contribute?

External building maintenance

- Communal repairs are not being carried out in many areas;
- Would like to know who is responsible for communal jobs e.g. clearing leaves from paths and refuse areas. It is done well in some areas, but not all areas. There needs to be a consistent approach.

3.2 *We're thinking about changing how often you pay your rent. At the moment you pay every fortnight with two rent-free fortnights in December and at the end of March.*

To make it easier for you to manage your household costs, we're proposing to spread rent over 26 fortnights instead of 24. This would mean an end to rent-free fortnights. You won't pay any more rent over the year, but you would pay less every fortnight.

For example: The annual rent for a 2-bedroom flat in 2019/2020 is £5,222.64 and the fortnightly rent is £217.61. With the proposed 26 charging periods, the fortnightly rent would be £200.87

Are you in favour of the Council changing the rent charging periods to 26 fortnights?

Tenant's understanding of changes

Delegates participating in the discussions did not come to a common view on this proposal with comments as follows:

- Rent statements would be difficult to understand as a result of an end to rent-free fortnights;
- Trying to communicate the changes to CEC tenants could be problematic;
- Could be easier for tenants to understand;
- CEC should give tenants more options than 26 fortnights;
- Some tenants may think CEC is lowering the rent, which could be confusing;
- Leave as it is.

Tenants' circumstances

In considering the varying circumstances of tenants, delegates consider that moving to 26 weeks will have pros and cons, with comments detailed below:

- Good for younger people on modern benefits and in work;
- Some tenants already pay twelve monthly payments;
- Would like to keep rent free fortnights;
- Would prefer to pay at lower amount over 26 fortnights;
- Could CEC offer the option to still have free fortnights if individual tenants want them?
- No – some tenants look forward to the rent free fortnights;
- No – it will affect tenants on low incomes who appreciate rent free fortnights for Christmas and prepare for days out in summer school holidays as many can't afford a holiday. Some older tenants need it too as many don't have much pension;
- Some tenants rely on the two 'free' fortnights;
- Many tenants like the free fortnights as the rent is expensive as it is; Tenants are able to recuperate lost rent on rent free fortnights and can catch up on arrears;

- Many tenants can work it out as paid monthly but low earners struggle as it is and look forward to the two fortnights free.

3.3 *As well as improving homes and neighbourhoods, we're making services more modern and responsive by 2022/23. We have a three-year service improvement plan to make this happen. Can you tell us one way you think we can improve our service to you?*

ETF

- Involve ETF and community organisations at the start and throughout the process.

CEC

- Housing Patch Officers should be more visible and available to tenants;
- Patch Officers should get to know their tenants more;
- CEC staff should have ongoing training on a range of issues;
- CEC should employ more apprentices;
- CEC should not have done away with the Housing Area Boards, as they were informative and tenants were at the heart of decisions made;
- Tenants can be waiting on phones for up to 30 minutes or more, meaning costly bills and Pay as You Go callers run out of credit;
- Have maintenance repair workers based in all locality offices;
- Instead of changing the service, improve it to an acceptable standard first.

Communication

Delegates consider that communication between CEC and tenants requires further improvement and transparency. Key issues include:

- Clarification on how tenants can get the correct information and who they should go to access information;
- Neighbourhood Networks – There is still not enough information for tenants on what the networks are, how they operate and how tenants can get involved;
- More locality walkabouts between CEC staff and tenants;
- Increased regular meetings between tenants and CEC staff, particularly in each of the localities;
- CEC should remember that not all tenants are on-line. Remember traditional methods of communicating with tenants.

Monitor and Evaluate

Delegates consider that monitoring, evaluation and reporting is crucial and recommend CEC considers:

- Demonstrating how tenants' views will make a difference!
- Ensuring methods agreed with ETF and tenants can monitor and evaluate the work of CEC are in place;
- CEC clarifies what plans are in place if the work being delivered by CEC is not to an acceptable standard and how tenants can play their role in this process;
- CEC sets up Focus Group meetings with tenants who complained about a certain aspect of CEC's housing service. The Focus Group can look at what can be done differently and what improvements can be made.

Repairs

Delegates consider:

- Repairs should be carried out correctly in the first instance;
- Clarification is required on the standard interpretation of 'emergency' repairs as tenants are being given conflicting information;
- CEC should consider decentralising repairs and moving it to the localities;
- There should be a named person to sign off repairs;
- At the moment CEC's repairs service needs improving. Sort this out before making amendments;
- CEC should hire additional call centre staff for the repairs department;
- Some tenants are having to wait weeks for repairs to be carried out;
- Some CEC workforce claim they have visited a tenant's home, but do not appear. On other occasions the workforce have moved to another property before the tenant has had a chance to answer the door;
- Many tenants are waiting on the phone for long periods of time before they are able to speak to someone in the Repairs Contact Centre.

Homeless

- Delegates consider that more hostels and other types of accommodation is needed for homeless people to take them off the streets.

4.0 Conclusion

ETF welcomes the opportunity to contribute to CEC's Housing Budget Consultation. This paper will be shared with the Federation's Executive Committee, thereafter the paper will be shared with CEC staff as part of the overall Housing Budget Consultation. ETF looks forward to working with CEC representatives to address the issues raised in the paper.

Appendix One: Tenants and Residents Groups represented at the ETF Meeting on 20th November 2019

Birnies Court Tenants Association
Gateside Tenants and Residents Association
Hailesland Park Neighbourhood Council
Laichfield Community Association
Magdalene Residents Association
Maidencraig Court Residents Association
Moredun Multis and Maisonettes Residents Association
Redbraes Residents Association
Total: 8