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Dear Colleagues,

IMPORTANCE OF BRINGING EMPTY PROPERTIES BACK INTO USE DURING THE PANDEMIC AND SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

In the short space of a few months, none of us could have envisaged the significant impact that Covid-19 would have had on Scotland. Our way of life, as we knew it, has completely changed. It is, however, heartening to see how the whole of Scottish civic society has come together to tackle the biggest challenge we have faced as a country. From the outset, the resilience, agility and innovative approaches to ensuring people are protected and lives are saved have been truly fantastic.

We are writing to thank you for the leadership and support you have shown, and continue to show, throughout the pandemic and as we begin to understand the route map towards a new normal. Together we have made good progress but there is more that we need to do together to get Scotland back to some form of normality.

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COVID-19 Response

One of the early actions which the Scottish Government, COSLA and the housing sector undertook was to establish three housing sector resilience working groups to work directly with local government, housing associations and private sector. Membership of these groups includes housing associations, local authorities, professional associations, private landlord, letting agent and tenant representative groups. The various expertise from across the sector, alongside partnership working, have proved helpful in understanding how social and private landlords are managing services in the context of the outbreak, as well as providing a platform to raise and resolve issues in a collaborative way. A number of outputs in the form of practical guidance and advice have been produced to help the sector provide essential services to people in their communities.

We wanted to draw your attention in particular to the '[Covid-19 Allocations Advice and Information for the Housing Sector](#)' guidance. This non-statutory guidance provides practical information for landlords, housing managers, service delivery staff, and contractors in how to safely continue allocations. The document outlines how existing statutory duties can continue to be delivered whilst adhering to public health advice on physical distancing, property cleanliness and safe working for staff.

The guidance had been developed in partnership with members of the three resilience groups. It brings together existing housing sector duties and requirements with guidance from Health Protection Scotland (HPS) to ensure voids can be processed safely and in line with infection control measures relating to the Covid-19 outbreak. We hope the practical guidance and the joint [ALACHO and HPS Q&A](#) will enable those who are not currently processing empty homes to act now to start bringing empty homes back into use for people who need them.

Furthermore, as stated in the [Scotland's Route Map](#) out of the lockdown, workplaces resuming in later phases can undertake preparatory work on physical distancing and hygiene measures during phase 1. Therefore, those involved in the letting or rental of homes are permitted to prepare their staff and their premises for the relaxation of restrictions on housing moves (phase 2).

Homelessness

Although we recognise the challenges that the housing sector is facing during the health crisis, we wanted to emphasise that bringing empty properties (voids) back into use is a priority to ensure the safeguarding of tenants. We would expect all landlords to be continuing to undertake best endeavours to bring voids back into use in a safe manner. However, data returns to the Scottish Housing Regulator from social landlords suggests that many have either stopped or reduced the processing of empty properties. It is vital that where possible this work resumes to ensure we keep Scotland's housing system running as smoothly as possible. The continuation of allocations is a vital step to ensure that homeless households in temporary or unsuitable accommodation, including domestic abuse victims, are moved onto settled accommodation.

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During the pandemic, great efforts have been made in moving a significant number of vulnerable people into short term alternative accommodation. Ensuring that everyone is moved on to stable and settled accommodation will require further work and the active support and involvement of the whole housing sector and third sector organisations. Ensuring the continued provision of secure and, where possible, settled accommodation for those affected by homelessness and for those in unsuitable accommodation remains a priority for the housing sector throughout this period.

Housing First is an important area to consider for those people with more complex needs who will benefit from settled accommodation with wrap around support. Most local authorities included an element of Housing First in their Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, which cover more than the six areas who are part of the Pathfinder programme. This means local authorities are well placed to work with partners to assess who would benefit from Housing First and prevent people returning to rough sleeping.

Domestic Abuse

As you will be aware, the current social restrictions on movement across Scotland creates new risks to those at risk of experiencing or recovering from domestic abuse and other forms of violence. Now, more than ever, women and children at risk of violence in the home will feel isolated and require support from the housing sector.

Local authorities and housing associations have a responsibility to prevent and respond to domestic abuse in accordance with [Equally Safe – Scotland's strategy for preventing and addressing violence against women and girls](#). We therefore also want to highlight the importance of ensuring that all local authorities and housing associations have a domestic abuse housing policy in place to support victims and would ask you to ensure that your organisation has a policy in place and that it is regularly reviewed.

A number of recent publications, set out below, provide detailed guidance to support social landlords in developing and reviewing their domestic abuse housing policies.

The Scottish Government in partnership with COSLA published [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Supplementary National Violence Against Women Guidance on 19 May](#). This guidance is aimed at ensuring that a sustainable joined-up approach to safeguarding the needs of women, children and young people experiencing violence during Covid-19 and beyond is embedded at a local strategic level.

Guidance for social landlords: [Domestic Abuse: COVID-19 \(April 2020\)](#) by the Chartered Institute of Housing and Scottish Women's Aid, explains the critical importance of all social landlords having a policy in place that sets out how they will respond proactively to domestic abuse. Good practice guidance published last year, "[Domestic Abuse: a good practice guide for social landlords.](#)" provides a sample domestic abuse policy template for housing providers.

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Partnership working as well as the need to improve the overall response to domestic abuse by ensuring landlords have developed policies to ensure victims of domestic abuse are able to move on from refuge accommodation to settled accommodation should remain a priority for social landlords. We have heard of instances where victims of domestic abuse in refuge accommodation have had their settled accommodation withdrawn in order to meet the needs of other homeless individuals due to the lack of availability of accommodation. This underlines the importance of increasing housing stock by bringing empty properties into use.

Interlinked challenges and local innovation

We recognise that there can be challenges in bringing empty properties back into use such as energy connections, waste processing, availability of removal companies as well as staff absences. However, we know of examples where landlords have found creative ways to overcome these challenges. For example, Fife Council's joint-working efforts of Housing, Building Services and Business Support has ensured that work on voids is now producing about 25-30 new lets per week to statutory homeless households and a small number of specific needs households. The service is also providing logistical support to help bereaved families empty homes of deceased tenants as well as offering furnishing and other support to help new tenants move in. South Lanarkshire Council is also using its suppliers to help tenants with moves where tenants are unable to source logistical support themselves. Similarly, some housing associations are using digital processes to commence tenancies as well as introducing remote working to develop safe working practices in supporting tenants. This includes contacting tenants by phone to identify what help they require prior to starting their tenancy and in providing white goods and related services.

Looking towards future economic uncertainty it is also crucial that we begin work to process any backlog of empty properties in both the social and private rented sectors in preparation for anticipated increase in homelessness presentation. It is anticipated that homelessness presentations to local authorities will increase once the lock down is lifted and we need to ensure the availability of housing stock to support vulnerable tenants who will be hardest hit by economic uncertainty or job losses.

This pandemic has brought huge challenges to all of us as individuals, as well as impacting on our organisations and communities in unprecedented ways but in many ways, it has brought out the best in us. What we have seen and heard in the past few months about the extraordinary efforts to continue providing essential services and to take steps to keep tenants and staff safe has demonstrated the very best of the housing sector. As we enter this next phase, we look forward to continue to deliver our essential housing services and to act on the opportunities presented to us to improve housing for Scotland further still.



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