



The Scottish Government

£15 MILLION  
STOLEN A YEAR  
FROM SCOTTISH  
TENANTS

No Rents  
in March

SEIZE  
THE FEES

# LIVING RENT



ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL ACCOUNTS 2019-2020

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## SECTION ONE: CHAIR'S STATEMENT

**WITH** over a hundred members attending Living Rent's Annual General Meeting in 2019 and through our daily work throughout the year, the union's members have demonstrated in practice how working-class tenants and residents coming together can change their reality and build power. In 2019, we showed our clear commitment to fostering a culture where mutual organising and support transform weakness into strength.

In line with members' wishes, when elected in 2019, the National Committee set out to expand local branches and to build power rooted in each community. This meant moving away from city-wide organising to meeting people where they live—in their neighbourhoods. To support members building their neighbourhood groups, Sean Baillie, our National Organiser at the time, produced a Membership Pack outlining the steps required to create local branches. Since then, along with strengthening Living Rent's internal structures and processes, members and staff have built four new neighbourhood branches, which have secured local wins and fed into broader city-wide and national campaigns. In addition, the National Committee have created policies for members and designed an ambitious training programme to develop leadership skills throughout the union.

The vision was and continues to be about expansion!

As of June 2020, the union has over 1,200 members. To support this solid membership growth, Living Rent's staff team also expanded over the past year. In Glasgow, Nick Durie is working alongside George Lavery to support members in Wyndford, Broomhill, Govan, Shawlands and Govanhill, while Sinead McNulty organises Edinburgh members, with a particular focus on Gorgie Dalry. Jon Black was hired as Operations Manager in December, and in early 2020, Jack Hanington became National Member Defence Coordinator to support members coming together to assist each other throughout the country. In May 2020, the National Committee appointed Emma Saunders to the post of Interim National Organiser and the union is currently in the process of recruiting three more organisers for Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Throughout 2019, our members led important city-wide campaigns. In Glasgow, the summer was marked by relentless actions against Serco and Mears, two private companies, over their treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Edinburgh members fought many cases of sham holiday lets in courts, and by taking direct action against the landlords and letting agents operating them. They played a key role in pressuring the Scottish Government to introduce new measures cracking down on short-term lets.

Like most organisations and people more generally, our reality has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. When measures to mitigate this pandemic were introduced, members across Scotland were quick to respond to this new context. Our online organising and campaigning forced the government to introduce a six-month ban on evictions for all tenants. This was a necessary first step as, in the midst of a pandemic, access to housing is healthcare. Then, Living Rent's social and council tenants led an impressive campaign to reinstate the cleaning of

communal areas in high-density housing owned by registered social landlords. We showed that we might be locked in, but we are never locked out.

The coming months and years are going to be hard for tenants as the economic crisis unfolds. In the last few weeks, the Scottish Government has shown its continued support to landlords by rejecting any bill that would protect tenants. Our members will make sure that tenants' voices are heard and that housing is always on the political agenda. But more importantly, we will continue to build power locally in our communities. As we grow, I hope many new branches spring up across Scotland while existing ones further expand their membership and win their campaigns. More than ever, we need to stick together and create long-lasting solidarity and power.

—Sonja Coquelin, Chair 2019-2020

## SECTION TWO: ABOUT LIVING RENT

**LIVING RENT** is Scotland's tenants' union. We are a democratic organisation run by and for tenants. We seek to unite and represent all tenants, whether they rent from the private or social sector. We are ordinary people campaigning for better rights for tenants, protections against rent increases, evictions and poor-quality housing, and for decent and genuinely affordable housing. We represent and defend our members when they're having housing problems.

Across Scotland, we have stopped evictions and won tens of thousands in repairs and compensations from landlords and letting agents, as well as major improvements to the law. By building tenant power and challenging landlords collectively, we not only win for our members but also fight for a housing and political system that puts people before profit. We believe in the collective power of tenants to come together to fight for their rights, and we use diverse tactics – including direct action when necessary – to achieve this.

We are not affiliated to any political party and only answer to our members, but we recognise the importance of influencing parties and politicians and holding them to account. We work with a variety of stakeholders, campaigning groups and charities when necessary to promote tenants' interests.

## SECTION THREE: KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

**LIVING RENT'S** last Annual General Meeting in May 2019 set out the union's goal to strengthen and develop neighbourhood branches as the key unit of the union.

Since then, Living Rent's work has focused on implementing this strategy: in Glasgow, members have founded new branches across the cities (in the Wyndford, in Govan and Shawlands, with initial meetings in Govanhill, Pollokshields, Partick and Knightswood under way) and in Edinburgh, members have started to organise locally in Gorgie Dalry, continued to campaign together in Muirhouse and considered plans to create more branches in Edinburgh North and South. These decisions form part of a wider effort to create more resources for members and to provide support for members to self-start their own branches.

Such expansion was not without its obstacles: we faced difficulties in ensuring staff retention and in moving the structure of the union away from city-wide branches, which formed the first point of entry for many tenants in Living Rent, to a locally focused approach. These challenges were tackled by increasing the number of organisers working for Living Rent, whose presence and time is crucial to deliver neighbourhood-based organising, and by recruiting an Operations Manager and a Member Defence Coordinator, both of whom have enabled greater support for members whilst freeing up organisers' time. This recruitment was enabled by the targeted efforts to grow Living Rent's membership and to engage with community and housing-focussed funders.

Over the last year, there was also increased attention to structuring the union internally: the staff team, in conversation with members, suggested set roles for branch and team leaders and provided training and ongoing mentoring to support members to take up such roles. This training will be formalised in ten training sessions, which will be rolled out across Living Rent in 2020 and 2021, with members evaluating this program's content to make it as relevant and effective as possible.

The following sections present Living Rent's successes and lessons with regards to expanding neighbourhood branches. They also outline the various neighbourhood campaigns that resulted from such organising and how neighbourhood organising has coped with the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, they describe the city and nation-wide campaigns that took place in 2019-2020.



## 3.1 STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING NEIGHBOURHOOD BRANCHES

### GOVANITES UNITE

With weekly street stalls and over 2400 doors knocked in Govan, the Govan branch was launched in July 2019. During a founding meeting, members identified that they collectively faced issues such as rising rents, insufficient cleansing and poor housing insulation and outlined their concerns regarding a planned local development. In August, 25 active members set out a campaign plan to tackle these issues and organised themselves to collectively address the individual issues reported by several members, through local member defence work.

Between July and September, the branch received training and support in member defence actions to support members facing eviction, to improve flat accessibility and to combat illegal housing fees. In parallel, they organised to carry out a first collective action. In September, with workers from the GMB cleansing branch, members gathered to protest against the condition of the back courts where overflowing bins caused hazardous risk and to draft responses to council plans. Later, residents outlined their demand for more social housing by distributing leaflets, making a video and speaking to councillors. These activities brought greater knowledge, skills and confidence to previously isolated tenants and increased community links in Govan.

Members' actions had an impact. For instance, 350 people signed the petition regarding cleansing issues and over 20 residents turned out for the day of action. These actions strengthened residents' confidence and led to concrete results: Glasgow City Council agreed to set up an enhanced cleansing service.

Following these actions, residents selected rent increases as the next issue to tackle. In December, they drafted a petition and campaign plan to demand that their housing association freeze rent increases. Residents organised outreach activities between January and March 2020 to speak to fellow tenants and neighbours regarding rent increases and affordability in the area. Whilst lockdown presented clear obstacles to further door knocking and campaigning regarding rents, members are continuing to plan for their demands to be heard and to support one another to deal with the challenges prompted by the pandemic.



Govan residents and workers protest against council cutbacks and rat-infested streets (24 August 2019)

## HEARING BACK FROM THE WYNDFORD

At the branch launch meeting in August 2020, it was voted that branch priorities would be challenging local heating tariffs, holding Cube and the wider Wheatley Group—the main social landlords in the area—accountable regarding the rents they charge and the level of services they provide and tackling anti-social behaviour with a community-minded perspective.

Those priorities were initially approached as three distinct campaigns. As the year has gone on – and with the onset of the pandemic – the situation has changed, but they have remained at the forefront of the work that the branch does. There are currently over 70 branch members and an organising team, which organise regular monthly branch meetings.

In Autumn 2019, the branch pursued the question of accountability with a ‘Where’s David Mackenzie?’ (the Cube boss had apparently been summarily dismissed and marched from the office) campaign. The poster campaign quickly garnered a response and gave residents access to Wheatley senior executive Jennifer Russell, who had temporarily replaced David Mackenzie as the acting director of Cube. This access was crucial in the branch’s later wins regarding anti-social behaviour.

In November, the branch secured its first victory regarding the heating tariffs by SSE, the local energy provider. This was the result of members organising a collective noise protest in SSE’s office, which the branch decided was a necessary step after several months of the local member defence officers supporting individual tenants with their heating bills. After the protest, SSE introduced a low-user tariff for tenants on low-incomes, which removed the high standing charge.

This was soon followed by another victory on the issue of anti-social behaviour. Members drafted a dossier of reports, which they submitted to Cube. Following this, a programme called REASSURE was launched, representing a joint effort between Cube, Scottish Fire and Rescue, Police Scotland and the Youth Service. The branch decided that it would monitor that the plan was implemented in a fair way and ultimately accountable to residents. As may be expected, with the onset of the pandemic, the landlord—Cube—and Police Scotland abandoned their side of the project, however the branch has pursued building a network of block representatives to ensure that residents’ issues are documented, addressed and organised around.



Wyndford members making themselves heard at the Wheatley group, November 2019



By February 2020, the branch decided to campaign against the housing association's 3.4% rent increase. To contrast with Cube's rent consultation, the branch launched their own consultation. Over the course of a month, they surveyed 1700 Cube tenants, who overwhelmingly rejected the rent increase. In comparison, 250 tenants returned the Cube/Wheatley surveys, and only a fraction of them supported the increase. Off the back of this, the branch organised a public meeting attended by over 25 tenants with the Cube director to demand the suspension of the rent increase. Whilst Cube pressed ahead with the rent rise, the branch began to plan escalation tactics, which were stopped by the pandemic.

Since then, the branch has continued to have regular meetings via Zoom. It set its priority on achieving proper hygiene protocols throughout high rise and low rise common areas. This campaign was key to establishing the national Hygiene Kills the Virus campaign—see Section 4. Lastly, the branch continued to build a network of block representatives, which will be crucial to the branch's effectiveness in the coming months.

## FOUNDING A BRANCH IN GORGIE DALRY

Residents and tenants in Gorgie Dalry founded their branch in January 2020. Representing a mix of private tenants, social housing tenants and homeowners, the branch decided on tackling rent affordability in the neighbourhood through tackling both social and private tenants' rent increases. The branch started to plan a longer-term campaign focussed on local social housing and those living in housing managed by Dunedin Canmore, aiming to gather members and information to fight for a rent freeze in 2021. In addition, given private tenants' frustration with the high rents in the area, members decided to push local councillors to advocate for a change in the national rent control legislation, which is unusable in practice.

Key communication tools have been developed for the branch, including a Twitter account, Slack and a Facebook Group for members to organise and share news. These tools have been vital since COVID-19 to continue to reach out to tenants. Just like other branches, in-person meetings were switched to Zoom meetings to enable a response to the COVID-19 pandemic within the branch. Members applied the national hygiene campaign specifically to Dunedin Canmore properties in the area, and reached out to local online mutual aid groups to connect with tenants who were looking for rent reductions due to economic stresses exacerbated by the pandemic. As such, over the pandemic, the branch focussed on member defence activities, as well as research to support the launching of local campaigns as soon as this is possible.



Gorgie Dalry Founding Meeting, December 2019

## MUIRHOUSE DESERVES BETTER

The union's long standing Muirhouse branch is also battling problems with rubbish, including blocked chutes, ongoing collection issues and hazardous disposal of waste. It is also facing long standing issues around cold and dampness in flats, which can be compounded by unresolved repairs. Indeed, tenants learned that the six main towers of Muirhouse are unlikely to pass the 2014 Decent Homes Standard, and are certain to fail the new 2020 energy efficiency standards, but a remote Council bureaucracy has failed to deliver the funding and works that tenants had won in 2018 to refurbish the towers in order for them to be energy efficient and warm. Rather, leaking roofs remain the reality for several of the blocks and homes still need to be insulated, especially as the winter threatens.



Muirhouse meeting, August 2018

Alongside these structural issues, tenants organised during the pandemic around hygiene. With others across the union, they compiled a damning dossier of hygiene failures, which was circulated to the Housing Minister. Following the union's success in securing new hygiene guidance, local tenants are organising to hold Edinburgh City Council accountable regarding these new hygiene protocols as well as regarding the long standing issue of repairs.

The branch has continued to write and circulate its local newsletter—the six block issue, of which the latest edition documented how tenants called out the fire brigade to inspect damaged doors, but received little follow-up from the Council. Tenants have shown that they will not be treated with disdain like this and a programme of escalation is underway regarding both cleaning issues, repairs and such fire hazards.

## GETTING TOGETHER IN BROOMHILL

In August 2019, tenants in Broomhill came together to discuss the many issues facing the neighbourhood. Following an initial public meeting and strategy session, they circulated a petition about bins overflowing with waste, following the landlord's—Cube again—decision to remove bulk bins from use.

After chapping every door in the scheme, tenants entered a negotiation with Cube housing's boss, winning the new bins which addressed the issue. A core team of leaders launched a new branch in December 2019 to tackle the long list of remaining issues in the area.

Similarly to the Wyndford branch, before the pandemic, Broomhill tenants were engaged in opposing Cube's rent rise, taking direct action and sending delegates to the public meeting where Cube's boss all but revealed that the decision was taken by the remote Wheatley Group's board and not by Cube. Broomhill tenants are now considering their strategy in light of this information, as their scheme adjoins another Wheatley-owned scheme, managed by Glasgow Housing Association, whose rents are structured differently. Meetings have proved harder to organise during the pandemic and will resume again once in-person meetings are safe to organise.

## LAUNCHING A BRANCH IN SHAWLANDS

In Shawlands, outreach began in September 2019 through door-knocking and stalls, 1423 doors were knocked, leading to 161 contacts and 37 members by the beginning of lockdown.

Involved members held their founding meeting January 2020, where they outlined the issues they faced (rent rises, lack of repairs, issues with local letting agencies) and their plans to tackle them (stall and outreach to build around member defence cases and a survey to evaluate rent rises in Shawlands). Since, the branch has grown its outreach activities and its member defence team, achieving three clear victories be they around arrears, disrepairs or evictions. Just like other branches, branch members rose to the challenges of lockdown, suspending local activities to strengthen the national campaigns around hygiene and cleansing and around protecting tenants from evictions and arrears.



Shawlands founding meeting, January 2020



## UP AND COMING LOCAL GROUPS:

In several areas, tenants have come together using the membership pack to form local groups and branches in order to establish a Living Rent presence in new cities and neighbourhoods.

For instance, Living Rent started supporting some tenants in Pollokshields after they reached out regarding their battle with Southside Housing Association. In January 2020, tenants in Pollokshields received a letter from their landlord, Southside Housing Association, informing them that a new heating system was to be installed in more than 200 properties in a month's time. There had been no consultation with the tenants who decided to stand up against their landlord as most of them strongly opposed these plans, which did not address the flats remaining cold despite huge energy bills. Over 40 tenants met in the local community centre to complain about Southside's decision and lack of engagement. Following these meetings, one tenant reached out to Living Rent for support and one of our organisers joined these meetings and helped the group to write competent objections to the planning application committee. This temporarily halted the plans and Southside tenants have continued to mobilise to ensure they hold their landlords to account. They are now considering how to launch a branch locally. In Glasgow, tenants in Govanhill have similarly started discussions around a number of local issues (back court rubbish, lack of repairs neighbourhood-wide) and taken on member defence cases, leading to a number of initial meetings and more outreach and organising plans come Autumn.

Following the national success of the hygiene campaign, Partick tenants have been meeting regularly and are in the midst of an organising drive. A month into organising they have already had cleaning reinstated and are working to challenge rodent infestations which threaten members' families. This organising drive process will continue for a number of months but there is already a significant concentration of members in the area getting organised.

In Lanarkshire, tenants launched their branch in June, to focus on member defence and outreach in Motherwell high rises which are under threat of demolition under council plans. They have launched their social media presence, designed and printed flyers to support their outreach activities and launched a survey to gather testimonies, build their contact list and support their campaign against rent rises and demolitions.



Lanarkshire members' outreach session, August 2020

In Aberdeen, members are in conversation as well to launch their branch, in July new members who signed up on the back of the COVID-19 'Rent and Work Survey' hosted a member induction. Now, members are planning for a large founding meeting with outreach and member defence at the forefront, recently taking on their first member defence case. In addition, initial conversations regarding branch launches are underway in Inverness, Dundee and West Lothian.

## 3.2 CITY-WIDE & NATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

### A/ LOCK OUT SERCO, LOCK OUT MEARS

In September 2019, Serco's Home Office contract to house asylum seekers came to an end, in part as a result of the pressure exerted by public campaigning led by a coalition of refugee and asylum seeker advocacy groups, of which Living Rent was part. Mears Group secured the tender for the new contract and, despite mass public outrage at Serco's handling of the situation, still failed to find a solution to house the 300 tenants under threat, enabling Serco to carry out evictions. As we had established in 2018 when this issue first arose, members of Living Rent Glasgow were committed to resisting this policy of forced destitution, and we launched a summer offensive campaign of direct action to defend our neighbours and communities.

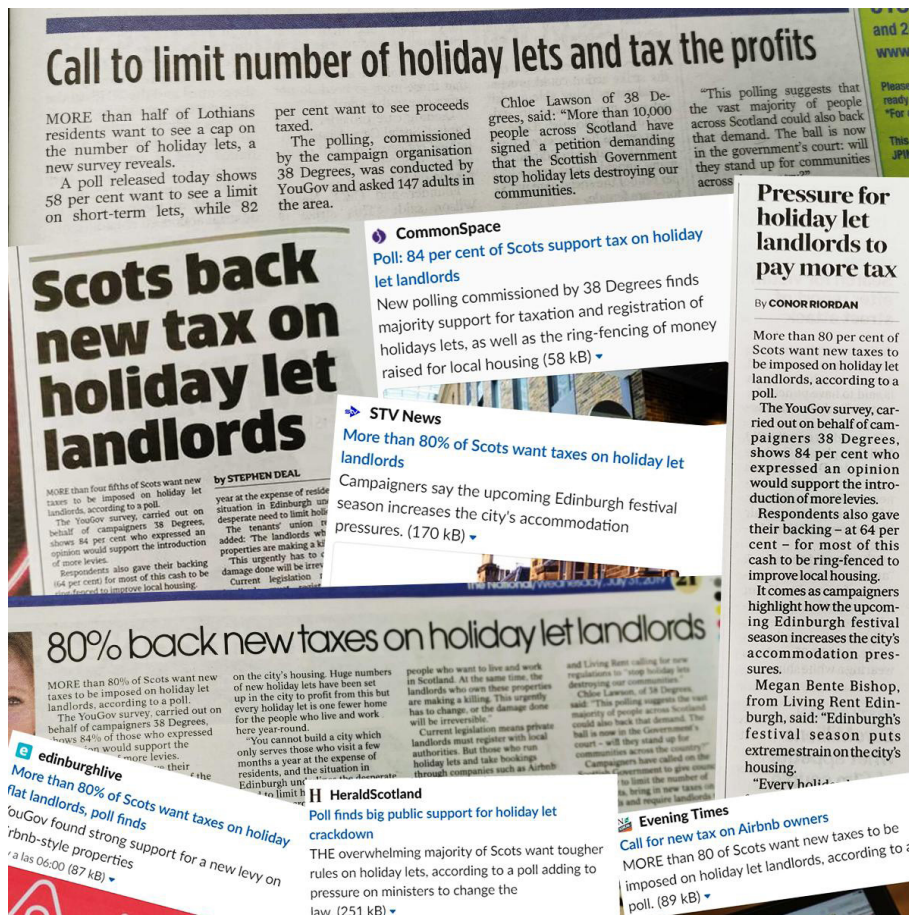


Lock out Serco Launch action (outside Serco's offices), June 2019

The campaign garnered widespread support. Living Rent Glasgow successfully organised multiple actions against Serco, Mears, Glasgow City Council and housing associations, involving hundreds of people within and outwith Living Rent. In the end, this campaign was able to get Mears to commit to a policy of no lock-change evictions, though there remain many problems with the system of privately contracted refugee and asylum seeker housing, an issue that the coalition and its member organisations continue to work on. Overall, the campaign was an excellent lesson in coalition building for members, and demonstrated the power of creative and engaging direct action.



Headlines of journals regarding short-term lets, February 2020



Across Scotland, but particularly in Edinburgh and the Highlands, more and more housing is being used as holiday accommodation for growing numbers of tourists. Due to the housing crisis, Living Rent has long-held that these properties should first and foremost be long-term affordable homes. Living Rent members have campaigned in Edinburgh for the Scottish Government to improve its regulation of short-term lets, as these are emptying neighbourhoods and driving up land rents, pushing for these three demands:

- For holiday-let landlords to be licensed and subject to the same vetting procedures as those landlords in longer-term lets
- To impose a tax on holiday-lets and for this tax to be ring-fenced for building housing locally, rather than it feeding back into the tourist economy
- To decrease the number of holiday-lets, particularly in the most housing-constrained neighbourhoods where they are proliferating.

After launching a petition calling on the government to enact these demands, which gathered over 10,000 signatures, we repeated our calls in the government's consultation last year. The government's plans announced on the 8th of January that it would give local authorities the power to implement all of our demands. This is a huge victory for the tenants and residents across Scotland, but the fight is not yet over. The next steps will be to ensure that the powers local authorities are given are robust enough to be effective and then that they will be enforced.



May Day Rally in Edinburgh, May 2019

Campaigning for the kind of rent controls that are necessary for Scotland has been an essential part of the union since its formation. Since 2016, our demands have remained much the same. This year, the call for rent controls has been stronger than ever, especially after many tenants' income took a hit during the pandemic. To continue to put pressure on the Scottish Government to reform its legislation, in February 2020, members in Edinburgh staged an action outside a property investment workshop hosted by Martin Roberts. The demands were clear: making a profit from housing when so many tenants are struggling to make ends meet would not be welcomed by us. We shut the event down.



The National, February 2020

Since the lockdown was imposed in March, union members had to campaign differently. Despite millions of people losing all or some of their incomes as a result of COVID-19, rents have continued to be expected and even to rise. Meanwhile, tenants have still faced poor and crowded housing conditions which heighten the risk of the virus. This is why a key aspect of our national campaign to protect tenants during the pandemic has focussed on getting effective rent controls implemented. With elections taking place next year, members across Scotland will be reaching out to candidates to garner manifesto pledges to revisit legislation and implement proper rent controls across Scotland.



## SECTION FOUR: RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

### 4.1 NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT TENANTS

When the pandemic broke out, the union adapted to the fast-paced changes of this situation. We were determined to defend our members, build strong community bases and put pressure on the government to protect tenants.

Living Rent members up and down the country pulled together in an incredibly short amount of time a campaign to secure a six-month ban on evictions for all tenants, which was won in March 2020. Following this, we launched a survey to understand how tenants were faring in the pandemic, which gathered over 800 responses. Our survey showed that over 60% of tenants were concerned with not being able to pay rent, and 45% were worried about getting into debt in the near future. This brought us to act in coalition with other tenants' unions in the UK to demand both greater protection against evictions, greater support for tenants to pay their rent and, more radically, the suspension of rent in order to protect members' ability to stay in their homes when more than ever we have seen that access to housing is crucial to people's health.

As the crisis unfolds, more and more tenants will be unable to pay their rent and will accumulate rent arrears, which is why Living Rent's member defence teams have been supporting members to negotiate rent reductions and prepare to resist evictions in the coming months.



Housing Day of Action, March 2020

This work lies alongside Living Rent's campaign for greater support for tenants to support those falling into arrears, as well as proper rent controls to tackle the issue of unaffordable rents in the first place.

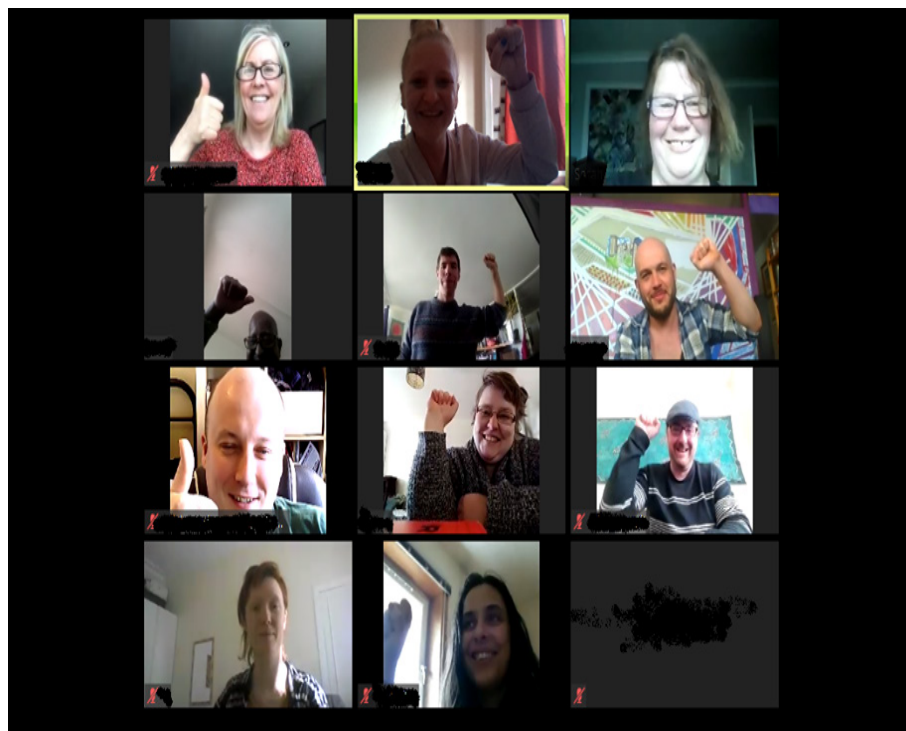
In the midst of a pandemic, access to housing is healthcare, and no one can stay home without a home.

## 4.2 HYGIENE KILLS THE VIRUS CAMPAIGN

During lockdown, the cleaning of communal areas in high rises was either massively reduced or simply withdrawn. Wyndford Living Rent members decided to confront their landlord, Cube Housing Association, and won their demand for deep and more frequent cleaning. However, the union then noticed that this commitment was only followed through in Cube's properties, with many multi-storey housing properties not receiving the level of hygiene procedures necessary to protect residents. As Cube is part of the Wheatley Group, tenants were able to force the roll out of Cube's new cleaning regime across the entire Wheatley Group. cross the country, however, the challenge remained to address landlords who were not protecting tenants. Living Rent tenants then conducted a nationwide mapping exercise to assess the national picture. The results were alarming—a piecemeal and patchwork situation emerged with some landlords doing right by their tenants and others using the pandemic as an excuse to remove vital cleaning services.

As a result, Living Rent social and council tenants decided to pressure the Scottish Housing Minister to issue nation-wide guidance regarding cleaning and hygiene for multi-storeys and higher density flats. This campaign achieved a massive victory in June as the government issued such guidance, and as the campaign also shed light on long-term hygiene issues tenants face due to years of negligence by landlords.

In the context of the pandemic, cleaning is an essential service, and our members will continue to ensure that all registered social landlords protect their tenants' health by following appropriate cleansing guidance.



Social and council tenants zoom meeting, May 2020

Following this campaign, the union held its Public Housing Forgatherings bringing tenants in public housing (whether they are in council housing or housing association housing) together to learn about the issues that characterise this type of housing and outline their vision for the future of social and public housing in Scotland. They produced a short manifesto, calling for:

(1) RSLs to be given the first right of refusal over whether they wish to make an offer to buy back any property acquired under defunct right to buy legislation being resold, in order to limit the growth of private landlords in housing schemes;

(2) for restorative justice for vacant land in all new public housing, to maximise public housing, dealing with the long term impact of mass demolitions of public housing, which in the past twenty years saw 66,000 homes demolished, largely unnecessarily. Given the enormous environmental impact of recent public housing demolitions it is paramount that new housing is constructed to last, built to the highest environmental standards, fit for purpose, incorporating district heating and rated for maximum energy efficiency, with technologies such as Passivhaus or similar approaches (eg those proposed in Our Common Home Plan);

(3) to tackle the accountability gap in stock transfer landlords. Housing stock transfer has not met the intended goal of community led housing, but has instead seen large landlords like the GHA transform into nationwide landlords, imposing rents and policies across huge tracts of the country. Living Rent tenants are calling for the role of tenants and public authorities to be strengthened in the governance of such landlords. Tenant and Municipal board members must not be bound by confidentiality clauses and must be allowed to freely criticise decisions and such representation should be expanded. Furthermore Living Rent tenants are seeking annual rent consultations mandated for RSLs to be put on a statutory basis—should a simple majority of tenants participating in consultations oppose or favour rent rises then this should be legally binding. All rent consultations must include an option to reject rent rises at the current time.



## SECTION FIVE: STRENGTHENING INTERNAL STRUCTURES

### DEVELOPMENT OF MEMBER DEFENCE TEAMS AND VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Member defence teams are made of tenants coming together on a city-wide or neighbourhood basis to fight and win improvements regarding members' individual housing situations, with many individual cases then prompting wider campaigns.

Each time that a team supports members to tackle their housing situation, members build new leadership and expertise, learning about their housing rights but also campaign-related skills around planning a strategy, negotiating with landlords and organising direct actions, as often landlords and letting agents fail to respect the law. The vision for member defence is to have well-structured, responsible teams on the ground, ready to respond to local housing issues in every neighbourhood branch. Each new case should produce an active member, empowered by collective action and member solidarity.

Member defence teams have developed at a city-wide level and increasingly are also being embedded within each neighbourhood branch. Member defence teams in Glasgow and Edinburgh are run by 8-12 active members, with appointed Chairs, Secretaries and First Points of Contact for each team; a pool of supporting members is involved to take on 'case-lead' roles as well as to plan and attend actions. These teams are member-run, with members taking the lead in providing advice and supporting other members to tackle their issues and achieve



Picket at Harvey's Lets, June 2019

their demands. Across both cities, they have won impressive victories, through a range of means and demonstrated the power of tenants coming together to defend their rights.

Meanwhile, neighbourhood branch member defence teams are building confidence and momentum. In the Wyndford, a small active team has



fought on numerous cases to build a name for the union, winning results for individual members but also feeding into wider campaigns, be that around heating or repairs. In Gorgie Dalry, the member defence team has achieved two victories and now has the capacity to take on cases in surrounding areas. In Shawlands, three members are working on cases of disrepair and rent reductions, as well as fighting against evictions. In Govan, two active members are supporting neighbours through rent reduction cases. The Lanarkshire member defence team sprung into action not long after the branch's launch, and two or three members there are busy with three cases. As experience and capacity grows in the neighbourhood branch member defence teams, members will be supported to take on formal roles, in line with Living Rent's ongoing effort to formalise roles across the union. Setting up teams in Muirhouse, Govanhill and Pollokshields is the next step in the strategy of expanding Living Rent's member defence work across neighbourhoods.

Such local work is supported by national gatherings where leaders from each member defence teams meet to share notes, compare tactics and look at some of the broader issues reflected by Living Rent's member defence work. During the pandemic, five national member-led trainings were provided to tenants across the country to support each other to achieve rent reductions, to resist the oncoming waves of eviction and to ensure that repair issues are addressed head-on. Over 100 tenants attended these trainings, many of whom went on to negotiate rent reductions for fellow members winning over £45,000 in rent reductions. Alongside these negotiations, members have secured over £20,000 in compensation related to deposits and repairs. Since 2019, member defence teams have resisted 5 evictions that would have left 15 people homeless. The member defence is building on the ongoing experience of resisting evictions by drawing up an anti-eviction campaign strategy and training which will ready the union's members for March 2021, when the eviction notice extension policy expires.



Member Defence team securing an adjournment for Catherine's eviction proceedings after a successful negotiation with Glasgow Housing Association, December 2019.

Whilst these numbers speak of success, we are also aware that each new team needs to build its reputation in each area to make sure tenants know that they can reach out to Living Rent when they have issues. Furthermore, member defence activities also rely on sustained outreach activities, which have been only online during lockdown. As lockdown restrictions ease, teams will consider how to resume in-person outreach. In addition to greater outreach and neighbourhood presence,

teams are now getting ready to create more collective campaigns from the individual cases that they have been supporting, notably regarding deposit schemes, poor letting agency practices or rogue landlords.

## SECTION SIX: PRESS AND MEDIA

Since 2019, the presence of Living Rent in the press and on social media has continued to grow. Living Rent was featured in multiple media outlets on a variety of issues and campaigns. In Glasgow, the city-wide campaign against Serco and Mears evictions received a lot of attention and the Wynford branch's numerous battles against Cube Housing Association and energy giant SSE were covered by various local and national media. In Edinburgh, the campaigns for rent controls and against sham holiday lets drew the most attention. During the pandemic, our members spoke about the need to address tenants' needs and in June 2020, our members appeared on BBC Scotland to raise concerns around the suspension of cleaning services in high-density housing on the back of Living Rent's successful Hygiene Kills the Virus Campaign. This coverage helped to generate greater awareness of the deplorable conditions tenants are forced to live in and the lack of accountability of social landlords.

Living Rent's website has been revamped to improve the overall design and how news is shared. It is easier to find out about Living Rent's work, its campaigns and branches and to be kept up to date with upcoming events. Living Rent's social media presence and engagement continues to grow with more than 10,000 followers on the Facebook pages; 300 following our newly set up Instagram account, and more than 4,000 subscribers on Twitter. More recently, members have produced a number of short videos and created a Living Rent YouTube channel to share our activities and victories more widely.

The member-run communications team has been joined by many new members, especially since the outbreak of Covid-19 as Living Rent's work shifted online. The team has created a number of guidelines for all the platforms in order to increase tenants' confidence in using these platforms, provided press release training and is now launching its video editing and reporting training.

## SECTION SEVEN: EXTERNAL RESEARCH AND PARLIAMENTARY ADVISORY

Living Rent representatives have been advising and providing insight for two ongoing research projects looking into the conditions in the private rented sector. The National Committee decided to follow up with these engagements to raise tenants' voice through a range of approaches and have more representation in such endeavours.

Firstly, Living Rent members have been working with the 'Raising Standards in the UK PRS' research team, who is working on a range of projects to provide insight on the private rented sector across the UK. This is a collaborative project undertaken by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, the TDS Charitable Foundation and SafeDeposits Scotland Charitable Trust. The project is funded until 2022 and has so far resulted in a policy briefing and a full report on alternative approaches to resolving housing disputes. All output from these projects can be found on the CaCHE website. Living Rent has also been in the advisory group for a research project commissioned by the Nationwide Foundation and implemented by Indigo House, aiming to understand the impact on tenants and landlords of changes to the Scottish private rented sector tenancy regime. This research will be running until 2022 and is currently in its data collection process.

Since June 2020, Living Rent has been a member of the Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and representatives will be attending to speak for our members.

Through our contribution and advice to both policy groups and research projects, we aim to ensure that ordinary tenant voices are represented in the early stages of data collection, policy proposals and discussions around policy. Our plan is to support more members to attend such meetings, whilst ensuring that our core focus continues to be building neighbourhood power.

## SECTION EIGHT: ANNUAL ACCOUNT AND FUNDING

### 8.1 ANNUAL ACCOUNTS

Annual Account 1 May 2019 - 31 May 2020

<b>Annual Accounts</b>	
<b>Living Rent</b>	
<b>For the year ended 31 May 2020</b>	
<b>Income</b>	
Donations from Unions	900.00
Grants	59,720.20
Members Subscriptions	42,557.88
One Off Donations	1,545.00
Donations for speaking, workshops	175.00
Other Revenue	1,127.41
<b>Total Turnover</b>	<b>106,025.49</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>	
AGM Expenses	120.00
Audit & Accountancy fees	600.00
Campaign Expenses	28.86
Childcare	60.00
Consulting	1,300.00
Employers National Insurance	449.29
General Expenses	8.49
Hiring Costs	888.00
Insurance	1,291.11
IT Software and Consumables	3,971.89
Legal Expenses	25.28
PAYE Costs	3,721.12
Payroll Service Costs	638.12
Pensions Costs	3,186.86
Postage, Freight & Courier	25.33
Printing & Stationery	364.26
Rent	5,778.00
Room & Hall Hire	414.50
Salaries	43,931.26
Staff Expenses	73.10
Staff Training	383.82
Telephone & Internet	394.45
Travel - Staff	471.10
Travel - Volunteers	423.40
<b>Total Administrative Costs</b>	<b>68,548.24</b>
<b>Members Funds</b>	<b>37,477.25</b>

**These are the accounts from our most recent financial year, which runs from the 1st of June 2019 to the 31st of May 2020.** They are not yet finalised with our accountants, so they may be subject to some slight changes.

Previous years' finalised accounts can be found on the **Companies House website**.

Living Rent's income showcases a fairly healthy balance between membership dues and grants, which ensures that Living Rent is resilient. We had a small amount donated by trade unions, like the RMT and Unite, along with donations following sponsored events, the closure of an organisation and branch fundraisers. We also received a refund of corporation tax from HMRC, given the fact that Living Rent is a fully mutual organisation, member owned and run, which should not be charged any tax.

Living Rent's outgoings are mainly to cover staffing costs, including pensions and national insurance contributions. We try to keep costs down in other areas to get best value for money from our members'



subscriptions. We also spend a reasonable amount on IT software and consumables, which is our website, database, hosting and other related purchases.

At the end of Living Rent's financial year, there was a surplus of over £37k, about half of which was unspent grant money and the other half representing Living Rent's reserve to be able to face unexpected events. Whilst this reserve is significant, it is yet to cover three months of the organisation's operating costs. In the coming year, the goal is to increase the percentage of membership dues in Living Rent's total income, in order to increase Living Rent's sustainability along with exploring opportunities for funding of Living Rent's organising plans.

## 8.2 FUNDING AND GRANTS

Between 2019 and 2020, Living Rent's fundraising team successfully applied to a number of grants. Most of these grants focussed on testing Living Rent's vision of neighbourhood branches. These grants were based on local organisers doing sustained outreach activities in an area to support the emergence of a branch and of locally focussed campaigns. Living Rent is still assessing how such a locally-based vision can work in areas where many renters are from the private sector and thus more prone to moving from area to area and have fewer common 'targets' in comparison to social and council housing.

Living Rent also secured grants to develop training for members as well as Living Rent's response to the pandemic, notably in terms of increasing member defence support and capacity across the union.

These funders include:

- National Lottery of which the Awards for All provided funding to support social and private tenants in Govan to launch their branch in 2019
- Nationwide Foundation of which the tenants' voice project funded Living Rent for two years to support private renters in Shawlands and Govanhill
- Foundation Scotland, whose funding stream to add value to housing charities in Scotland supported Living Rent in launching its national member defence work from March 2019 to March 2020
- Open Society Initiative for Europe supported Living Rent to organise private renters in Edinburgh, as well as to strengthen Living Rent's internal structures, running from January 2020 to December 2021
- The Tudor Trust, who will be supporting neighbourhood organising in North Edinburgh from August 2020 to July 2022
- Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has supported Living Rent to develop a union-wide training program, of which the implementation has been revised due to the pandemic.
- Along with smaller grants, from Baillie Gifford, Edith Ellis and Paul Hamlyn, through a partnership with Arika whose goals varied and were more project and campaign-based.

## SECTION NINE: VISION FOR NEXT YEAR

Writing this report is always a wonderful (and slightly daunting) endeavour, where we try to capture everything that is going on, in small snippets, knowing that these words don't do justice to the immense labour that members have invested into making the union and fighting for their rights. It's pretty amazing to look back though, and see the progress achieved: the ongoing and solid growth of our membership, the expansion of our resources and staff members and the consolidation of Living Rent's structures. Such achievements feel ever more important, with the year ahead promising uncertainty, loneliness and an economic crisis as the country reckons with the virus and the lockdown. As usual, we will take such challenges head on.

In the coming year, we remain committed to building effective and structured neighbourhood branches, both within specific neighbourhoods and across cities and regions where there is a lower density of members. To achieve this, staff members and existing Living Rent representatives will continue to support all members to build effective teams and branches, to take on formalised roles and to select, plan and run local and national campaigns. As Living Rent expands, we are also aware that this expansion needs to be followed by developing effective and accountable internal structures, be these neighbourhood branch organising teams, city and national forums or member defence teams.

To develop such active leadership, education and training remain key—from storytelling to resisting evictions, our members need to be equipped to fight on all fronts. In 2020-2021, we will launch a union-wide training plan, for members to feel confident in the various skills necessary to defend their rights and conquer new ones.

Lastly, on a national level, with the upcoming Scottish elections, we will continue to campaign for rent controls and for more affordable, healthy and safe social housing. We will also campaign for more specific demands, namely that Registered Social Landlords be given the first right of refusal over whether they wish to make an offer to buy back any property acquired under the defunct right to buy legislation. By achieving this, we aim to limit the growth of private landlords in housing schemes. We will also campaign for restorative justice for vacant land in all new public housing, and set our focus on tackling the accountability gap in stock transfer landlords.

There is work to do and the tasks ahead may look huge from where we are now, but we are making the road by walking. There is power in a union and we are building it, step by step, block by block, neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

# LIVING RENT



[livingrent.org](http://livingrent.org)