

Greater Govan Campaign on Housing Benefit Cuts

Report of Public Meeting on the Bedroom Tax and on Benefit Sanctioning

26 June 2014 in the Pearce Institute

The meeting was chaired by Tom McMahon who opened by saying that many people thought that the Bedroom Tax had been scrapped. 'It has not. We still need to campaign against it and the other attacks on benefits. We also need to help all those hit by the benefit changes. This is why this meeting is being held and why we have produced new guidance leaflets.'

Mike Dailly, Chief Solicitor at Govan Law Centre, spoke of the importance of bringing legal services into the reach of those who need them most – the socially vulnerable and marginalised. The most recent venture by the Law Centre was to set up a city centre Hub to provide legal help to the City's 3,000 street homeless. It had also set up another Hub in Leverndale hospital.

The current situation with the bedroom tax underlined the need for such services. The Scottish government had voted £50m to cover the cost of the tax but the DWP still posed obstacles and in Glasgow, as elsewhere, the funds could only be accessed by individual applications for Discretionary Housing Payments. Many people found this difficult and humiliating. Others who had been refused such payments in past believed that they were permanently barred. It was important that everyone knew it was their right to apply.

It was also important that people continue to appeal the tax itself. Legal precedents now existed for those with disabilities or those who had to use a bedroom as a dining room because they only possessed a galley kitchen. The Law Centre had successfully taken forward cases in both these areas and were fairly confident that the DWP would not be able to secure successful appeals.

The other current attack on benefits was through sanctioning claimants. New regulations had been introduced in 2010. This imposed tougher rules and tougher penalties. The minimum penalty was now the loss of all benefits for a month. Minor infractions, such as being five minutes late for the interview, now entailed a massive loss of income. Between 2010 and 2013 the number of penalties had doubled and in the last year increased by 30 per cent again.

Mike said all those penalised should be encouraged to appeal. 53 per cent of all appeals were successful and could be raised on the basis of disputed facts or simply on the basis of fairness and proportionality.

Kenny Macleod, Acting Director of Linthouse Housing Association, stood in for Ian Davidson MP who was unable to attend because of a bereavement.

Kenny noted the importance of the Bedroom Tax hearings organised by the Scottish Affairs Committee. These had gathered evidence of the unfairness of the tax from across Scotland and provided important arguments for its complete repeal. Its Impact Report published this March recommended the following:

"we urge the Scottish Government to:

- i) make a clear commitment to provide sufficient funding to enable every Local Authority in Scotland to make DHP payments which will cover the full costs of the bedroom tax for all of those who have been affected by it.

ii) make a commitment that any rental arrears which have been accumulated during this financial year, as a direct result of the bedroom tax, should be written off, and any additional rent paid as a consequence of the bedroom tax, should be refunded.

iii) ensure that the process of application for such a refund is as simple as possible.

9. We reiterate our view that if the Scottish Government is able to mitigate the impact of the bedroom tax in the current financial year, then it should also do so for the previous financial year (2013-14). Thus it should make additional funding available to ensure that all bedroom tax arrears are written off and, to avoid moral hazard, all bedroom tax payments made last year are refunded. It is essential that these issues are resolved and processes clarified as soon as possible."

Kenny stated that it was the policy of the Housing Association to ensure that everyone knew their rights to secure DHP and to make preparations to cope with further attacks on claimants. He noted the recent research that revealed that of the 20 areas worst affected by benefit cuts 12 were in Glasgow. Current cuts were taking up to £220m out of the local economy through penalising the poorest.

The Introduction of Universal Credit would put many more households at risk. Up to the present the government's plans had been running well over a year behind schedule but they still proposed to place 12 million on universal credit by the end of 2017 and had just started to roll out the scheme in Inverness.

It was therefore very important to keep up the campaign of information and to highlight the detrimental consequences to the poorest and most vulnerable.