

Welfare Reform workshop

Morning session 33 attendees Afternoon session 34 attendees

Attendees at both sessions clearly enjoyed the experience and expressed thanks to Colin Wiles for a clear concise presentation and ability to answer the majority of questions.

The 'face to face' feedback was encouraging; attendees felt they now have a better understanding of Universal Credit. I hope the 'paper' feedback confirm this.

In fact the morning session over ran the allotted time which meant we had to time manage the afternoon session.

Bedroom 'Tax'

- Questions raised by people of working age of around 57-59 years old who have one or two spare bedrooms, not in receipt of a State Pension are in receipt of Housing Benefit and who have a small private retirement pension. Under the current proposals may lose either 14% or 25% of Housing Benefit.
- Questions raised by disabled in receipt of HB who have one spare bedroom and no day care needs but require night time care that requires a carer to stop overnight.
- Concern about 'mature' people of working age who have one spare bedroom and family or grandchildren who visit at week-ends and holiday periods.
- How do people already on HB make up a shortfall in rent etc., do they go begging in the street? Sponge of friends or relatives? Take in a lodger who may turn out to be 'undesirable' and difficult to remove?
- How many local authorities are building or intend to build one bedroom properties? It is wrong to penalise those who have just one spare bedroom, when other (one bedroom) accommodation is currently unavailable.

Payment of Universal Credits

- It is proposed to pay Universal Credit monthly in arrears which mean tenants will always be in rent arrears and may face the threat of eviction through no fault of their own.
- Shock and dismay expressed about UC paid to only one member of the Housing Benefit household. What if those people suffer from substance or alcohol abuse and spend HB and other benefits to fund their addiction?
- Concern about the impact direct payment to the claimant will have on rent arrears that may lead to 'cut back' in the repairs service.

Right to Buy

A few attendees at both sessions were not in favour of selling off council properties.

Strong condemnation of the discount increase for RTB, I suggested - and majority of attendees agreed - those who buy either a council house or a council flat (on long term lease) should not make a substantial profit in the short term. They should live in the property for a minimum of 10 years and pay back a portion of the discount should they sell within 5/6 years.

Overall attendees agreed a need for reform but urge the government to have a rethink on some of the proposed aspects and ensure local authorities are equipped to help and protect the elderly, disabled and most vulnerable in our communities.

Welfare Reform and Universal Credit are very emotive subjects. During both sessions it became clear it is causing great distress amongst tenants of all tenures.

On a personal level I thoroughly enjoyed chairing the workshop; working with Colin Wiles was very pleasurable and interacting with attendees was also an enlightening experience.

Jim Nicholl (Birmingham)