



## **Scotland's Housing Network (SHN): Welfare Reform Forums Oct/Nov 2015**

East Forum Edinburgh – Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2015 (NASUWT Office)

West Forum Glasgow – Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2015 (Trades Hall)

North Forum Inverness – Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> November 2015 (The Spectrum Centre)

### **Summary Report of Events**

#### **Introduction**

Late October and early November 2015 was the timing of the third round of this year's SHN welfare reforms. The Edinburgh and Glasgow events were held on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> October and Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October respectively. The Inverness event followed on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> November.

Attendance numbers were again healthy with around 100 people attending the events with numbers in Glasgow the highest, Edinburgh second and Inverness with fewer in attendance. A range of local authorities and housing associations were represented with interest continuing to be driven in the main by the roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) and its emerging impact on social landlords across the country.

As well as this continued interest in UC roll-out the programme for each event stretched our thoughts into the wider impacts in terms of poverty and particular groups in society, such as disabled people. At a broad level the implementation of UC was the main topic, with general updates on welfare reform provided along with a specific focus on the impacts on children & families as well as disabled people. In light of feedback from participants at previous forums there was also time left for open discussions at each forum.

The main speakers at all the events were representatives from the Department of Works & Pensions (DWP), the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA),

Inclusion Scotland, and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). An additional speaker in Glasgow was the Wheatley Group.

The programmes at all three events were similar with an additional speaker in Glasgow:

- An update from the DWP at all three events on the UC implementation programme -Edinburgh (Jim McGonigle), Glasgow (Bill Higgins) and Inverness (John Davis);
- An update from the SFHA on welfare reform (Jeremy Hewer in Edinburgh & Glasgow, Karen Wright in Inverness);
- The impacts of welfare reform on disabled people were provided by Inclusion Scotland – Edinburgh and Glasgow (Rosalind Tyler-Greig) & Inverness (Bill Scott);
- The impacts of welfare reform on children & families by CPAG (Kirsty McKechnie at all 3 events);
- Liam Spence from the Wheatley Group outlined how they are managing welfare reform and the impacts on their tenants in Glasgow;
- Open forum discussion in the afternoon session.

### **In Detail (Presentations and Q&As)**

The Forum presentations are available at the welfare reform library (there is also a host of guidance, policy and research documents on welfare reform at this website):

<http://www.welfareformscotland.co.uk/>

You can also sign-up for the SHAW (Social Housing and Welfare Reform) bulletin available to social landlords across Scotland to receive regular weekly practice updates by emailing Catherine Louch at Prospect Community Housing - <mailto:Catherine.Louch@prospectch.org.uk>

At each forum Tony gave some **brief updates from the SHN's perspective**. These broadly highlighted:

- For attendees to note that the SHBVN had re-branded to **Scotland's Housing Network (SHN)** and the website, stationary, email addresses etc. were in the process of being update;
- Universal Support Delivered Locally "Testing & Trialling" sites – Tony had contacted Argyll & Bute Council on this and their project had been extended to November and would then be evaluated along with other UK sites. Hoped that A&B representative would be able to attend next round of forums in new year;

- To make people aware of Jobcentre “open days” that SHN had been invited to attend by DWP – was an invitation to see new UC processes in action at various jobcentres across Scotland;
- Emphasised need to complete SHN quarterly data benchmarking return for welfare reform indicators – SHN would be producing a brief summary of headline data every quarter;
- The “Creating a Fairer Scotland: Social Security Stocktake Paper” published by the Scottish Government giving their current views on range of new powers including the housing element of Universal Credit, Discretionary Housing Payments and Universal Credit flexibilities.

**Universal Credit roll-out** remains high on the agenda for participants and generated a lot of discussion. Some of the key points from the DWP presentation were:

- As at 17/09/15 approximately 12,000 UC ‘starts’ in Scotland with 63 Jobcentres now delivering UC and Tranche 4 (Dec 15 – Apr 16) will include a further 20 jobcentres;
- ‘Trusted Partner’ pilot to be extended to test Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) process among a wider group of social landlords across the UK – landlords will be selected through and Expression of Interest process (tight timescale with deadline for EoI Friday 13/11)
- Alison Hunt has replaced Ian Marshall as lead for housing issues in DWP – she will be conducting a full review of social landlord service aspects and put in place additional support if required;
- Intensive Activity Period starts on 26/10/15 – designed to facilitate full-time job seeking from day 1 and will be applicable to approximately 10% of single young people aged 18-24yrs (and are not currently in education, training or employment);
- In Work Earnings Progression Trial (IWEP) – offers support to people in low income households with low earnings (range £330-£1000 per month) and is currently in place in Inverness (will be rolled out to remaining Scottish sites Dec 15 – Apr 16). Claimants allocated to 3 groups that will determine the type of support required i.e. number of weekly interventions or ‘light touch’. DWP also keen to emphasise the role and responsibility of employers in career and salary progression for individuals;
- Digital roll-out sites still to be confirmed but they will take all new claims once rolled out;
- According to DWP about 23% of UC claimants have APAs in place with 95-96% of these approved;

- In Glasgow Bill Higgins re-iterated that telephone/email contact issues should be directed to the relevant DWP District Partnership Manager;
- In Inverness John Davis was able to give **an update on the USDL trial in Argyll & Bute** emphasising that it had been extended to November 2015 to gather further evidence and focus on Post Office Card Account (POCA) holder characteristics;
- As at 31/08/15 1,739 people had been involved in the A&B trial – 613 had been referred to housing support officer with 234 actually referred for support (IT, adult literacy and most for budgeting skills). Full evaluation to be undertaken at end.

There were a number of questions and queries generated across the forums with regard to UC. For example would there be sanctions related to IWEP? – yes as last resort. Is the Intensive Activity Period for young people only at this stage? – yes. On the digital elements what about those with no access to a computer and time/travel/cost issues – digital access is being improved through jobcentres/libraries etc. There is also dedicated support in jobcentres for digital issues. Travel costs can be paid in certain circumstances. Some participants highlighted illiteracy issues and how this will need to be considered particularly through Delivery Partnership Agreements and universal support.

There were further queries over the use of secure emails required by the DWP and this would be a requirement to be part of the 'Trusted Partner' pilot. A number of housing associations in Scotland don't have secure emails. River Clyde Homes (Glasgow forum) and Hebridean Housing Partnership (Inverness forum) in particular highlighted this and are examining this in their organisation in terms of feasibility. However some HAs already use criminal justice email that appears to be on DWPs acceptable list.

In Glasgow the **Wheatley Group gave their viewpoint on how they are managing welfare reform**. The main points in the presentation were:

- Estimated that eventually 20,000 of their tenants will be UC claimants however by end of October 2015 the number is 160 tenants;
- 6,000 of their tenants affected by the 'Bedroom Tax' and 350 potentially affected by the new £20k per annum Benefit Cap;
- Wheatley operating model includes small patches (circa 200 homes) with generic, empowered Housing Officers;
- UC 'champions' ( 1 Housing Officer) in every office, a range of advice services available and employability, digital and tenancy support services;

- Observations on experience of UC to date include service centre staff helpful but inconsistent, notifications of customers moving to UC not happening, APAs monies being received but reference numbers an issue and “learning as we go”!;
- Housing options and wider financial inclusion approach been important in ensuring good framework for delivering services;
- Over the last few years Wheatley has improved performance on rent arrears with a reducing number of tenants in arrears;
- Future plans on this agenda for Wheatley include launch of a new bank account (in conjunction with Barclays) providing a ‘buffer account’ for paying bills, likely to put in an EoI for ‘Trusted Partner’ pilot extension, developing and extending digital tools for customers i.e. ‘popcash’ a live app and tackling payday lenders with partners.

There were a few questions for the Wheatley Group including what the role of the group debt recovery team is? – They lead on contact with tenants, support, payment arrangements and ultimately legal process. However for UC claimants because of the ‘7 waiting days’ rule they are being considered differently in this context. Liam also noted that they did not at this stage have detailed information to share on rent arrears issues among UC group. Another question related to whether the 200 home patch size applied across the group – yes except Dunedin Canmore who have recently joined the Wheatley Group. Will the UC roll-out lead to a change in the current organisation and structure of housing service – not planned to at the moment.

At all three events the **SFHA provided a broader update on welfare reform developments** from their perspective:

- Tranches 1 & 2 of UC roll-out completed with Tranche 3 started (including South Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, Inverclyde, Dundee, Aberdeen, Moray and West Lothian). Tranche 4 starting in 2016;
- Highlighted calls for evidence with regard to the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee – “Future of Social Security in Scotland”, UK Parliament Work and Pensions Committee – “Inquiry into Benefit Delivery”, Scottish Parliament Devolution Further Powers Committee and the Fairer Scotland conversations on welfare powers and employability;
- The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has also a call for evidence open on the Scottish Welfare Fund and a “draft statement of practice” (deadline 27/11). Jeremy Hewer at SFHA keen to obtain views of HAs on this to feed into SFHA response;

- Sanctions – UK Government response to Oakley report will be to trial a “yellow card” system for claimants being sanctioned (2 weeks to provide good cause or reason to avoid sanction), will consider extending definition of “at risk” groups for hardship payment and DWP has issued guidance on Housing Benefit being exempt from sanction (although note difference between this and “disallowance” of benefit);
- “Trusted Partner” – basic concept that social landlord (if obtaining status) could decide whether tenant could have APA in place from day 1. Up to 20 landlords (mix of urban/rural, LA/RSL, large/small) across UK being selected through the EoI process. Landlords must have secure email and be ready to start in January 2016.

Inclusion Scotland attended all 3 events and gave us insights into the overall impact of welfare reform on disabled people. The key presentation points were:

- A wide range of impacts are felt by disabled people in relation to the welfare system across the board;
- Moving from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to Personal Independence Payments (PIP) will mean fewer people being in receipt of assistance (potentially 66,000 less in Scotland by 2018 according to the Scottish Government) – impacts on mobility vehicles, paying for care and stress of change;
- Employment Support Allowance will lead to fewer claimants for this due to stricter assessment criteria and 12 month time limitation – changes to incapacity benefit/ESA annual average loss of £3,480 per affected household;
- ‘Mandatory Reconsideration’ introduced in October 2013 – more difficult to challenge decisions with new step in process, time delays in decision and have to claim JSA while awaiting decision;
- Sanctions – 61% of ESA sanctions against people with ‘mental and behavioural disorders’;
- At a more local level social care charges (non-residential) vary across Scotland from £8.28 per hour in West Lothian to £23.70 per hour in Angus – affordability of social care is an issue particularly in context of welfare reform changes;
- Housing Benefit entitlement for young people (18-21yrs) to be changed and potential adverse impact on independent living objectives with exemption categories unclear at the moment;
- Simply adapting to the changes a barrier and challenge for some disabled people – require more accessible advice/support etc.;

- Attitudinal impact of media and welfare reform links to disability – increased abuse reported and rise in hate crime. Also generally increasing risk of poverty among disabled people;
- **Inclusion Scotland have recently launched a “rights and resilience” project to help disabled people and their communities negate the impact of welfare reform (link below to webpage on Inclusion Scotland Website);**

<http://www.inclusionScotland.org/index.php/news/28-rights-resilience-launch>.

Further discussion on impacts on disabled people highlighted issues with language and terminology around the current PIP process where existing claimants receiving letters “inviting them to apply for PIP” and not emphasising the need to respond or the potential consequences of not responding. Others mentioned the loss of Housing Benefit disability premiums and some people claiming PIP inadvertently. In particular the impact on people with mental health issues (often unnoticed or diagnosed) appeared to be a concern for social landlords and the need for appropriate service responses. Overall the view appears to be that the demand for all types of advice and support services is increasing in the wake of welfare reform. In Inverness Bill Scott from Inclusion Scotland also referred to a project in West Lothian where volunteers were being trained to accompany disabled people to PIP/ESA assessments and this had help increase the rate of awards.

Finally for presentations the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) continued the theme of the impacts on particular groups in society and specifically children and families. The main information presented included

- CPAG (as well as their advice line and other services) have an ongoing “early warning system” project that aims to collect data, feedback and case studies on welfare reform particularly from front-line services. This evidence is brought together to providing an analytical dimension to the overall impacts of welfare reform;
- Changes to the up-rating of benefits have been the most damaging in terms of the recent welfare changes according to CPAG – for example child benefit has decreased by 10% in real terms;
- Child poverty rates are now projected to rise reversing the downward trend seen up to 2010 and the UK government is also proposing to change the current child poverty definition taking into account worklessness and educational attainment;

- The proposed changes to Working Families Tax Credits would affect a wide range of people in occupations including teaching assistants, road sweepers, nursery nurses, bank clerks etc.;
- The further welfare reform announcements made in the summer budget are likely to increase financial and living standard pressures on poorer families – for example increased conditionality in UC for parents, family element removed from Housing Benefit, freezing of working-age benefits for 4 years, new requirement for parent/s to look for work when child is aged 3yrs;
- In CPAG's experience the use of foodbanks is related to either a loss of or delay in obtaining benefits;
- Key findings thus far from the "early warning system" include advice and information vital, sources of emergency support need to be more widely publicised and there is a need to "poverty proof" services.
- **CPAG is keen to gather case studies from the housing sector and other organisations on the front-line of welfare reform so check out this page on how to do this:**

<http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/how-you-can-get-involved>

In terms of discussion there was a query over whether staff could call the CPAG helpline and yes this is the case with one participant commenting that the "advice line is really helpful". Another question was over the specifics of any UC issues arising – 3 issues identified by Kirsty in response were Discretionary Housing Payments and some LAs not awarding these to UC claimants, confusion over the 'gateway' criteria for UC and work-based conditionality issues.

The final session at each event allowed some time for open discussion (although limited time in Glasgow as additional speaker slot). Some of the points made across the forums (not surprisingly mainly relating to UC roll-out) were:

- Continued issues with reconciling Universal Credit and housing costs;
- How the APA review process works and the role of work coaches in recommending review periods?
- One HA had experience of a 20% deduction being made for rent arrears to a UC claimant when the landlord had not asked for it;
- Housing does not have all the solutions to this particularly in relation to support and advice given the huge demand;
- Difficulty still in ascertaining whether a tenant is in receipt of UC and also the exact date of claim start even when notified;
- In a recent roll-out area 1 HA reporting that most of those tenants in receipt of UC are in arrears;

- In Highland Council observed that at recent event for stakeholder organisations still a lack of knowledge on UC and what it means for customers and organisations – need to consider ongoing information/training needs again.

## Conclusions

Attendance at the events was again excellent and thanks again to all those that participated in the forums. As always further suggestions from participants are welcome for future agenda items. Please email [Moira Fraser](mailto:Moira.Fraser@shbn.org) at the SHN if you have any suggestions and we will endeavour to incorporate these.

These forums are delivered by the SHN to support landlords with assistance from other national housing organisations such as the SFHA. Part funded by the Scottish Government the SHN forums have three established regional networks in north, east and west Scotland.

The forums are free to all social landlords across Scotland – both SHN members and non-members. The sessions are intended to allow landlords an opportunity to share practice and support one another's intervention strategies.

The events are chaired and facilitated by Tony Donohoe, SHN Associate. Tony can be contacted at <mailto:info@tonyconsulting.co.uk>.



### ***Presentations***

For more detail on the discussion please see the presentations posted on the SHBVN website. Each of the presentations can be viewed or downloaded on SHBVN's website at:

<http://shbvn.org.uk/welfare-reform/>

they can also be accessed at the Housing & Welfare Reform Library by following the link:-

<http://www.welfarereformscotland.co.uk>



### ***Mailing List***

To ensure that you receive all information on forum events and outputs make sure you are on our mailing list by contacting Moira Fraser at:- [moira.fraser@shbvn.org](mailto:moira.fraser@shbvn.org) or telephone 0131 240 5228.



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