



Scottish Housing Best Value Network: Welfare Reform Forums Oct/Nov 2014:-

Summary Report of Events

Introduction:-

In late October and early November 2014 the latest round of SHBVN welfare reforms were held across Scotland. The first event took place in Glasgow on 29th October with the second a day later in Edinburgh on 30th October. The Inverness event was held on the following Monday 3rd November.

As always the events were well attended with over 90 participants coming together to hear about and discuss the latest policy developments and their impact on housing. The Glasgow event was one of the busiest yet (over 40 attending) and the event in Edinburgh was also well attended. The Inverness event attendance increased from the last event. As usual there was a range of local authorities and housing associations represented with staff involved in a plethora of roles from housing management to tenant participation to finance and housing benefit.

The programme this time round was again very interesting broadly covering Universal Credit (UC) implementation, advice programmes, research on welfare reform and general updates. Across the forums there was a specific focus on the current progress with Universal Credit with speakers from both the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Highland Council who are involved in the UC pilot in the Inverness area.

The programme at all three locations was identical apart from one slot where the topic varied. In summary there was:

- A presentation from the DWP on Universal Credit & Partnerships and progress on implementation (Jacqueline Brown in Glasgow and Edinburgh, Faye Morton in Inverness);

- Gail Ward from Highland Council followed this up with a presentation on the implementation of the Universal Credit pilot in Inverness and specifically the impact on housing organisations and tenants;
- At all three event Jeremy Hower from the SFHA updated on a range of welfare reform issues affecting landlords and tenants. In Inverness Jeremy also provided some additional information on financial inclusion;
- Hazel Thoms from the Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB) also attended all three events and spoke about progress with the Making Advice Work (MAW) programme and in particular projects being delivered by social landlords. In Inverness this was supplemented by Helen Barton from Albyn Housing providing an update on the MAW project being implemented in the Highlands;
- Keith Dryburgh from Citizens Advice Scotland presented at the Glasgow event on the impact of welfare reform on advice services;
- In Edinburgh Julie Guy, a social researcher from the Scottish Government, highlighted how the Scottish Government is approaching measuring the impacts of welfare reform through a comprehensive research and evidence gathering programme.

In Detail (Presentations and Q&As):-

The Forum presentations are available at: <http://www.welfarereformscotland.co.uk>. As usual the opportunity for questions from the audience followed each presentation.

Each forum started with a couple of updates from Tony, first of all to highlight that the Scottish Government had hosted a 'round table' event on welfare reform a couple of weeks previously. This is prior to the national conference on housing in Edinburgh in November where welfare reform will be one of the topics under discussion. Tony noted that there had been some discussion over the main issue of potential devolvement of welfare powers particularly Housing Benefit and the work of the Smith Commission in this context. Secondly one of the other main issues discussed at the event was asset-based and co-production approaches to welfare reform. In the context of the programme Tony also advised of recent feedback from Cosla on UC who had requested that the DWP postpone the roll-out of the programme in Scotland until the Smith Commission had reported. However the roll-out would continue and Cosla will continue to work with DWP on this and it is anticipated that LAs will be given some resources for this with Delivery Partnership Agreements also being developed. Tony also mentioned that Argyll & Bute and Dundee City councils are 'testing and trialling' sites with the DWP for new approaches to service delivery.

The audience across all three forums heard directly from the DWP on the latest developments in **Universal Credit and partnership approaches to delivery**. Some of the main points included:

- Terminology has changed from Local Support Services Framework (LSSF) to Universal Support – Delivered Locally (USDL). This is focused on applicants for UC who will need assistance with the process to one degree or another;
- Update and Trialling Plan was published in December 2013 on working together to test various aspects of delivery;
- 11 formal trialling sites selected across the UK (9 in England/Wales) with 2 in Scotland – Argyll & Bute and Dundee City councils;
- DWP highlighted some of the main groups of people who may need USDL i.e. prison leavers, homeless, people with disabilities, addictions;
- At local level Delivery Partnership Agreements between DWP and LAs will set out service delivery arrangements to achieve 'coherent claimant journey';
- Highlighted importance of Personal Budgeting Support due to direct payment of housing costs, monthly and single payment changes;
- Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA) outlined including direct to landlord when 2 month rent arrears and considered in individual case-by-case basis;
- Various factors affecting applicant will be considered when decision-making for APAs – tier 1 and tier 2 is DWP terminology distinguishing where highly likely/probable and less likely/possible need for APA;
- 'Landlord Preparation Strategies' guidance will be forthcoming from the DWP (although no clear timescale for this);
- DWP also emphasised the introduction of digital jobcentres (Wi-Fi, increased computer accessibility etc.) to search for jobs, access emails, update CVs and important of money advice services for applicants.

In Glasgow and Edinburgh Gail Ward then presented directly on the UC pilot highlighting the following points:

- The Pilot has been 'live' in Inverness Job-Centre Plus since November 2013 and covers as large geographical area;
- There have been 640 claims to date with currently 32 'known' Highland Council tenants on Universal Credit (30 of these are in rent arrears);
- Total rent arrears are just over £21,000 for these 30 tenants;
- Particular issues with tenants (5 in number) in receipt of UC and in temporary accommodation - high levels of arrears and DWP not paying £45 per week management allowance element;
- 7 requests have been made for APAs with one direct payment now currently in place;

- Identifying UC claimants difficult and lack of information sharing;
- Major impact on working practices and need for landlords to prepare for changes;
- Also difficulties for claimants (tenants) such as unsure what benefit to claim and reporting change of circumstances;
- However good working relationship with DWP and managed to move issues forward (a landlord log for RSLs/Highland Council has been created to share issues, information and responses);
- Initiatives such as Trusted Partner Status will be important in allowing social landlords to access APAs more easily;
- Personal Budgeting Support less successful in terms of applicants accessing;
- Highland Council used various methods to communicate changes to tenants such as newsletter, website, tenant groups, specific survey of tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit;
- As a landlord need to be flexible, communicate, assess risks and impacts, liaise effectively with DWP, identify those who may be affected, joined-up service approach etc.

Across the three forums a number of questions on UC and the pilot were raised and points made including:

- The reliance on communication in terms of applicants in difficulty with arrears and switching to APA – Gail Ward (Highland Council) replied that this had been difficult as communication from DWP needed to be improved. Jacqueline Brown (DWP) pointed to the Dunedin Canmore direct payments demonstration project which had some success in improving communication between landlord and tenant.
- Question on the role and responsibility of the work-based coach in terms of personal budgeting. Jacqueline pointed to the personal budgeting support that would be available and also the importance of the “Claimant Commitment”;
- Who would be funding any additional support – Jacqueline highlighted that the USDL may have some funding attached to support delivery of services;
- It was highlighted again that tenant profiling is important in preparing for changes;
- Questions on the consultation and language (i.e. triage) that DWP uses and how have they engaged with service users in improving this– Jacqueline responded that they would consider this;
- Clarity on decision-making on tier 1 and tier 2 factors for APAs – Jacqueline advised that this would be DWP although there is potential enhanced role for social landlords through ‘Trusted Partner’ status;

- There was some discussion over the link between tenancy agreements, housing costs and Housing Benefit eligibility. Pointed out that housing costs can be paid to a non-tenant;
- Question over whether a UC award will include an itemised listing of benefits splitting out housing costs and other awards – yes it does was the answer.
- How will APAs and tenant payments be identified – DWP will use National Insurance number. Gail advised that may require landlords to consider collecting and recording NI no's if they don't currently;
- How will DWP provide support for BME applicants needing language support – Jacqueline responded that this will be provided where a need is identified;
- In response to ability to start a UC application on-line and then save – DWP not found a solution for this yet;
- Query over multiple applications having to be made where applicants in temporary accommodation and moving about – for example in Edinburgh there are 10,500 TA placements every year;
- What solutions are there for people who are unbanked? For a UC payment you will need some sort of bank account;
- For job-seekers will there be assistance with IT issues – yes the assisted service will cover this was reply from Jacqueline;
- How are rural issues being considered for applicants (such as postal sign-ons)? The Argyll & Bute testing and trialling may look at some of these but will be reliance on joint working/delivery of services to overcome some of these barriers according to DWP;
- Question on why the Highland Council and Dunedin Canmore experience of rent arrears was different – response that Highland implementing UC pilot whereas Dunedin Canmore piloting direct payments within current Housing Benefit system so easier to manage perhaps (for example knowing which tenants were going to receive direct payment);
- How long will it take for direct payment to be processed and paid to landlord – unclear although the DWP has set up a direct team and phone number for landlords at UC service centre;
- How long does it take to get a UC appointment and how do people sign-in to system? – on same day according to DWP and need email to initially sign-in to system (assistance will be given on this);
- How will the testing and trialling be evaluated? – will be discussed between DWP and delivery partners on each project to develop frameworks;
- Issue also discussed over proof of rent and how DWP verifying – Gail Ward advised that their own housing system 'screen dump' not adequate and had suggested to DWP to include initial question asking who their landlord is on the UC claim form.

At all three events Hazel Thoms from SLAB presented on **the Making Advice Work Programme**. The programme funds a wide range of welfare reform mitigation projects across Scotland. There are three streams of funding which Hazel outlined although the focus was on Stream 2 which is 25 projects involving around 50 social landlords. Across the programme over 25,000 people have been assisted with a wide range of civil problems and has helped prevent repossessions and evictions. In terms of the Stream 2 projects the following main points were made:

- Over 7,000 clients assisted up to August 2014 with a total client financial gain of £4.7m;
- In the whole programme more women than men have sought advice and clients are more likely to be in employment;
- In Stream 2 client characteristics included 85% white Scottish, 40% reported having a disability, 34% unemployed and 56% had a bank account;
- To a great extent focus has been on achieving sustainable resolution of problems with a general focus across debt, benefits and housing issues (mix of pre-tenancy and problem arising interventions);
- Hazel highlighted that other policy interventions (such as DHP and mitigation funding from the Scottish Government) had shifted the focus to some extent from original intentions although had uncovered unmet need across clients with projects adapting where appropriate and responding to these;
- Lower than projected focus on housing options type services although successful where this has been applied as part of a project;
- Positive impacts have been reported by landlords such as improved joint working with other social landlords, advice agencies and better practice in connecting tenants to advice and help.

There were a few further points over the course of the events with regard to the MAW programme:

- In response to a query over accreditation of advice services Hazel highlighted the importance of this as part of the programme work;
- Question over the mapping of advice services and is this being done? – Hazel replied that there is some joint work on this being progressed by SLAB, the Improvement Service and the Scottish Government.
- Hazel also advised that the Scottish Government and the Money Advice Service are keen to continue the MAW programme beyond the current agreed funding timeline of March 2015. Watch this space for further news on this!

In Inverness Helen Barton gave an update on a practical example of a **MAW Stream 2 project (the Highland Social Housing Under-Occupancy Assistance Scheme)**

which has been in operation across the Highland area. The focus is on advice for social housing tenants affected by welfare reform changes and involves all 6 social landlords and 4 advice agencies. It is based on a 'one-stop shop' approach to advice on debt and housing options where appropriate. To date there has been 346 referrals to the service with a range of positive welfare and housing option outcomes being achieved. For example 25% of tenants referred have moved or received an offer of more suitable accommodation and 25% have been supported to maintain their tenancies. Helen also presented a small number of interesting case studies to emphasise specific successes of the project (all available to read in the presentation!). Helen also usefully highlighted some of the emerging strategic and practical issues for landlords including the fluid and unpredictable policy and funding environment as well as the shifting political scene post-referendum and possible devolution of welfare powers. At a more practical level continued pressures on housing supply and ensuring the pace is kept up on referrals to the project from all partners and across geographic areas is important.

At the Glasgow event Keith Dryburgh (CAS) provided a good overview of the **impact of welfare reform on advice services in Scotland**. Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is the most common issue that clients seek advice on and charity support (mainly food parcels) was the biggest increase in advice needs last year. Keith emphasised the wide range of benefit changes that welfare reform has brought in from ESA to tax credits to restrictions on uprating benefits and a much harsher sanctions regime. It is estimated that £1.6bn a year will be taken out of the Scottish economy once all the changes take effect. Bureaux across Scotland have seen an increase in activity such as benefits issue advice, complexity of problems, more form filling and representation. In 2013/14 over 85,000 JSA sanctions were applied in Scotland. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was introduced in June 2013 and all Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claimants will be re-assessed for this – estimated that over 100,000 people in Scotland will have a reduced entitlement or lose it altogether. Keith also covered the major impacts on clients with those with disabilities particularly affected, increased stress and uncertainty, food (1 in 50 clients have a food parcel issue) and fuel poverty etc. In response to a specific question on payday loan brokers (multiple applications) and if CAB are aware and have come across this, Keith replied that they have and the Financial Conduct Authority is looking into this.

At all events Jeremy Hewer from the SFHA gave a presentation updating the audience on various **recent developments in the world of welfare reform**. In

Inverness he also focused on the issue of financial inclusion (see presentation for full details). Some of the main points included:

- Over 45,000 households across the UK affected by the Benefit Cap (mainly in London and south-east with only just over 1,900 in Scotland);
- Universal Credit not yet rolled out to families but further roll-out (mainly single people) across the UK from February 2015;
- There may be other informal trial sites for USDL (as well as the 11 formal ones across the UK) – could be 6 ‘informal’ in Scotland;
- Outlined the Smith Commission timetable and areas being considered including Housing Benefit, Attendance Allowance and the Work Programme;
- Highlighted some of the main political party commitments leading up to 2015 General Election (freeze on benefits, reducing benefit cap from Conservatives and abolishing bedroom tax, raising minimum wage from Labour);
- The DWP has published “Universal Credit at Work” document including their strategy for rolling out UC and how success will be measured!

There was a query around whether the Conservative party proposal to freeze benefits included Housing Benefit but unclear if this is the case. A point was also raised around the difficulties faced by young people accessing housing and Housing Benefit. Jeremy did add that Conservative party proposals also included withdrawing completely Housing Benefit entitlement for some young people. At Inverness Jeremy was also able to update on the SFHA response to the Smith Commission – main thrust of which on welfare was that devolved powers should be wider than simply HB and Attendance Allowance and should include for example ‘working age’ benefits.

Finally in Edinburgh Julie Guy (SG)¹ gave an overview and demonstration of the Scottish Government portal that brings together **welfare reform and housing evidence** (click link below for access):

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/supply-demand/chma/welfareandhousingevidence/welfareandhousingevidenceportal/welfareandhousingevidenceportal>

The portal basically brings together data and research evidence on welfare reform and links them to the current Housing and Regeneration national outcomes. Headline information on key topics is provided with a link to the more detailed evidence or research report behind this. All agreed that this was a very useful tool and in response to a couple of questions Julie confirmed that the SG is keen for

¹ Tony Donohoe also gave a brief demonstration of the portal at the Inverness event.

people to put forward any local evidence/research they have for potential inclusion in the portal (subject of course to some basic checks on research reliability etc.). Julie also added that they would look into providing the facility for people to sign-up to email updates highlighting when new documents are added.

Conclusions

Once again the forums were well attended and helped to provide a useful policy and practice exchange for housing organisations across the welfare reform spectrum. The focus on Universal Credit and speakers from both the DWP and Highland Council proved particularly popular. As always further suggestions from participants are welcome for future agenda items. Please email [Moira Fraser](mailto:Moira.Fraser@shbvn.org) at the SHBVN if you have any suggestions.

These forums are part of a range of projects being delivered by CIH, SFHA and SHBVN to support landlords. Part funded by the Scottish Government the SHBVN forums have allowed three regional bases in north, east and west Scotland to be established.

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

The event was chaired and facilitated by Tony Donohoe, SHBVN Associate.



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://www.shbvn.org.uk/welfare-reform/east-forum/>

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 or telephone 0131 240 5224.



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