



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 4TH MARCH 2014

SUBJECT: WELFARE REFORM PROGRAMME UPDATE

**REPORT BY: ACTING DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES AND SECTION 151
OFFICER**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To inform Members of the progress of the Welfare Reform Programme.

2. SUMMARY

2.1 The changes in benefits introduced by the UK Government via the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and Local Government Finance Act 2012 have been seen as a priority by CCBC.

2.2 A Programme Board of senior officers and a steering group of officers from key service areas was established in July 2012 to oversee projects that would prepare the Authority and its residents for the changes.

2.3 This report is providing information on the relevant activities to-date.

2.4 All projects have ensured and are ensuring that the residents and our authority staff are prepared for the changes introduced by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Local Government Finance Act 2012.

2.5 New support services have been introduced and are being monitored to ensure that residents, and especially the vulnerable ones, have access to the advice and support needed in order to adjust to the changes.

2.6 The allocation of funds for the Discretionary Housing Payments for the year 2014/2015 has increased to £382,715 compared to £292,597 for the previous year.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

3.1 This report provides an update on some of the Authority support activities directly linked to CCBC Improvement Objectives and the Caerphilly Delivers – Single Integrated Plan in relation to the Council anti-poverty strategy.

4. THE REPORT

4.1 The present report follows up on previous ones and in particular the one presented on 24th July 2013 included in Appendix 1, which, amongst other information, contains the programme background details and overall objectives.

- 4.2 The projects included in the programme are:
- Welfare Reform Act and Council Tax Reduction Scheme Awareness
 - Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme
 - Under-occupation (removal of spare room subsidy)
 - Other benefits changes (Benefit Cap, PIP, DAF)
 - Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot
 - Local Support Services Framework
 - Gwent Money Advice Service Project
- 4.3 The progress for each project is provided below (Para. 4.4 to 4.10) together with an update on the Discretionary Housing Payments (Para. 4.11).
- 4.4 **Project 1 - Welfare Reform Act and Council Tax Reduction Scheme Awareness**
- 4.4.1 The initiatives to raise awareness have been numerous and the initial focus of the programme. For details please refer to the previous report in Appendix 1.
- 4.4.2 New initiatives are being agreed and signed off by the Board as and when required.
- 4.5 **Project 2 – Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme**
- 4.5.1 Welsh Government have adopted a scheme very similar to the previous year (only technical adjustment).
- 4.5.2 CCBC adopted the scheme for 2014/15 on the 28th January 2014.
- 4.5.3 The impact of council tax increases upon CTRS (Council Tax Reduction Scheme) has been reflected in the draft report on budget proposals 2014/15 and Medium Term Financial strategy 2014/17 to be presented to Council on 26th February 2014.
- 4.6 **Project 3 – Under-occupation (removal of spare room subsidy)**
- 4.6.1 For detail around the removal of the spare room subsidy legislation and the other welfare changes please refer to the previous report in Appendix 1. Useful information is also available on the corporate website (<http://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/benefitschanges>).
- 4.6.2 On 8th January 2014 the Department for Work and Pensions announced that tenants who have been occupying the same property since 1996, have not moved house in this time (with limited exceptions) and have been in receipt of Housing Benefit continuously, except for short breaks of less than 4 weeks, will not be affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy from April 2013. The Authority's Benefit Section worked together with the Rents Section and Housing Associations and identified 307 claimants who were affected by the exception and consequently awarded the extra entitlement. On 12/02/2014 the Department for Work and Pensions announced that the regulations will be amended from 03/03/2014 and those who benefited from this exception will be affected again by the removal of the spare room subsidy from this date.
- 4.6.3 The Tenancy Support Officers are continuing to visit the under-occupying tenants (1750 to end of December 2013) to offer relevant support. Considerable savings for council tenants are being identified and other specific support and referral (e.g. debt advice) is provided and evidenced.
- 4.6.4 More detail about the activities relevant to under-occupation can be found in the dedicated report on the impact and risks of the welfare changes to the Housing Services being presented to this Scrutiny Committee on the same date as the present one (Appendix 2). The same report will also be presented to Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

- 4.6.5 A motion on the removal of spare room subsidy was discussed initially at this scrutiny committee on 24th July 2013 and finally at Council on 19th November 2013. A report was also presented to Members to provide them with further information, as requested by Council on the 8th October 2013, in relation to proposals that were agreed by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group and supported with additional proposals by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on the 1st October, 2013, to mitigate against the introduction of the under-occupancy rules following Welfare Reform. Council resolved that the Notice of Motion could not be supported, but requested further reports be presented to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on a number of initiatives to mitigate the impact of the under occupation rules.
- 4.6.6 Evidence has been provided to the consortium commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to monitor the impact of Housing Benefit reform.
- 4.6.7 The Work and Pensions Committee is undertaking an inquiry into provision of support to meet housing costs in the reformed welfare system, and relevant evidence was submitted by CCBC.
- 4.6.8 The Wales Audit Office (WAO) is conducting an Improvement Study on the impact of welfare reform specifically in housing and CCBC is part of the study. Relevant documentation was submitted in December 2013 and interviews with key officers took place in January 2014.

4.7 Project 4 – Other benefits changes (Benefit Cap, PIP, DAF)

- 4.7.1 The Benefit Cap was implemented in Caerphilly on 15/07/2013.
- 4.7.2 The Personal Independence Payment (PIP) due to replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA) is currently being rolled out for new claims and for time limited awards. Reassessment for existing claimants commenced in Oct 2013 in defined areas and these areas will be extended during 2014. Caerphilly is not currently planned to be one of these defined areas. From October 2015 the DWP plan to start contacting all other existing claimants to invite applications for PIP with the expectation that everyone will be contacted by late 2017.
- 4.7.3 The corporate website was updated with key information for the Benefit Cap, PIP and Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) that replaced Social Fund and Crisis Loans.
- 4.7.4 Support workers were briefed regarding DAF.

4.8 Project 5 – Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot

- 4.8.1 The project was extended to December 2013 and the Final Evaluation Report has been submitted to DWP. The activities focussed on three key areas: digital support, financial inclusion/budgeting advice and employment access support.
- 4.8.2 A synopsis of the project and key features and outcomes for each areas are provided in Appendix 3.

Digital Inclusion

- 4.8.3 The digital inclusion activities, in partnership with Get Caerphilly Online, included drop-in IT support sessions (known as “Digital Fridays”) delivered in 6 libraries with 15 volunteers (digital champions) regularly supporting staff at the sessions. Two of the sessions are delivered solely by volunteers. The on-line housing benefit and change of circumstance forms went live on the corporate website in January 2013 and the take-up has so far been about 60% of the total claims.

Financial Advice Support

- 4.8.4 As part of the pilot, 250 frontline staff including Supporting People providers, JCP staff and local volunteers have attended the awareness raising training on the financial impact of the welfare reform on households, which was commissioned to CAB as part of the Pilot. Feedback from questionnaires to staff indicates that a high percentage of those who attended the training have used the information to support, advise and signpost local residents.
- 4.8.5 Tenancy Support officers are also providing tenants affected by the removal of spare room subsidy with support to address any financial needs and more information on the outcomes of their activities is provided in the report in Appendix 2.
- 4.8.6 The Pilot also introduced a new referral process to CAB for casework and preliminary results indicate that there could be a wide significant extent of debt amongst some of the tenants. In particular an average of £7,500 pre-existing debt per person referred was recorded during the first three months of the referral process. More statistics on the support are provided in Appendix 3.

Employment Access Support

- 4.8.7 In relation to the employment options support delivered in partnership with JCP, the number of residents referred to the fast track employment access support has exceeded 200 and the outcomes have been very positive. In particular 30 residents referred have found employment and 45 have accessed training.
- 4.8.8 The final pilot evaluation report was submitted to the DWP beginning of February 2014.

4.9 Project 6 - Local Support Services Framework

- 4.9.1 In February 2013 DWP published the Universal Credit Local Support Services Framework which was developed in partnership with local authorities and sets out the principles for providing support for claimants with additional or complex needs to help them make and manage Universal Credit claims and prepare for work. The Framework sought comments on the proposed approach received 149 responses from across the local government, housing and the voluntary sectors. The documentation is available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-local-support-services-framework>.
- 4.9.2 The framework will be providing a collaborative structure for planning holistic and integrated localised support for claiming and maintaining a claim for Universal Credit. Caerphilly has been involved in a number of working groups supporting the development of the framework, the Welsh Support and Exceptions group and also the local support services reference group (a national group).
- 4.9.3 Further updates to the framework are planned and will take into account the current universal credit implementation timelines. The LSS Framework was updated and released in December 2013 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-local-support-services-update-and-trialling-plan>) to include information from the various pilot and pathfinder projects, as well as proposals for further testing. A fully updated framework is expected to be released in autumn 2014 in order for partners to plan for the financial year 2015/16.
- 4.9.4 A Task and Finish Group made of CCBC and JCP resources has been set-up to map current provision and funding streams of relevant services in CCBC area. The slowdown in the roll out of Universal Credit has removed some of the urgency to develop the framework however further dialogue will take place over the next few months.

4.10 **Project 7 – Gwent Money Advice Service Project**

- 4.10.1 Caerphilly is the lead authority of a Gwent wide project on Mitigating Welfare Reform across Gwent. The project aims at better aligning local delivery of money advice services and improving the signposting and awareness of financial inclusion issues across the Gwent, ameliorating the consequences of welfare reform, tackling poverty and combating financial exclusion.
- 4.10.2 The Project Manager has started in her role and the Research Officer will be starting next month. The original plan is being rescheduled.
- 4.10.3 Current and predicted demand for money advice, financial services and service provision will be mapped. This will inform a development programme to better align current resources to need and to develop capacity to meet gaps in service provision. This will be through training programmes and developing capacity in new and existing organisations and guiding funding decisions.

4.11 **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)**

- 4.11.1 Discretionary Housing payments (DHPs) are additional payments made towards rent. They are only paid to residents already receiving housing benefit who need more help with their housing costs over and above their benefit award.
- 4.11.2 Caerphilly County Borough Council, like every other Council, is given a fixed amount each year by the Central Government to pay DHPs. The allocation that Caerphilly received for 2013/14 was £292,597. The Authority also secured extra funding from Welsh Government of £63,000 to top up this amount in order to help people cope with the impacts of Welfare Reform, in particular Under Occupation.
- 4.11.3 To date Caerphilly has spent £303,560 and awarded future payments of £35,299 totalling £338,859. These awards have given financial support to 1014 tenants.

Social Sector Size Criteria	887
Benefit Cap	13
LHA	99
Other	15
Total	1014

- 4.11.4 In the Autumn Statement, the government announced that there would be an additional £40 million available for DHP in 2014/15, thus making the total amount of Government Contribution £165 million. Caerphilly's allocation for 2014/15 has increased to £382,715.
- 4.11.5 The current criteria for dealing with DHPs, as presented to this Committee on 16th April 2013 (Appendix 3), has proved to be successful in that the allocation for 2013/14 has been used effectively and has helped lessen the impact of Welfare Benefit changes on tenants' finances. It is therefore the intention to keep to these criteria and continue to involve partners, e.g. social sector landlords and supporting bodies to help in the process. It is important that these guidelines are in place so that all claimants are treated fairly and those in most need are given the financial assistance they require to support them to maintain or achieve a solution to secure their tenancy.

5. **EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no equalities implications.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no financial implications. The Welfare Reform and relevant preparation activities have financial implications that have been and will be detailed in other suitable reports.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no personnel implications. The Welfare Reform and relevant preparation activities have personnel implications that have been and will be detailed in other suitable reports.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 This report includes all consultations as listed below.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the report is noted for information.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 The report contains information for the consideration of the Policy and Resources Committee.

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 This report is for information only. The Programme activities described in this report are to comply with the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Local Government Finance Act 2012.

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Consultees: Nicole Scammell – Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer
Shaun Couzens – Chief Housing Officer
Cllr. Gerald Jones – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member For Housing
Paul Lewis – IT Development Manager
David Regan – Lead Finance Officer (WRA)
Sandra Isaacs – Rents Manager
Richard Beasley – Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot Project Coordinator
Amanda Main – Acting Benefits Manager

Background Papers:
Programme Working Documents

Appendices:

- Appendix 1 Report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee 24th July 2013 – Welfare Reform Programme Update
Appendix 2 Report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee 4th March 2014 – Update - Housing Benefits Under-Occupation Rules - Please see Agenda Item No. 7(2)
Appendix 3 Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot – Key Outcomes
Appendix 4 Report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee 16th April 2013 – Discretionary Housing Payments 2013/14



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 4TH MARCH 2014

SUBJECT: UPDATE - HOUSING BENEFITS UNDER-OCCUPATION RULES

REPORT BY: INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update on the impact of the introduction of the Housing Benefits under occupation rules.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Central Government has introduced a wide range of welfare reforms via the Welfare Reform Act 2012. One of the measures which took effect on April 1st 2013 is a reduction in Housing Benefits for social housing tenants of working age who are deemed to be under-occupying their home.
- 2.2 This change means tenants received less Housing Benefit if they live in a Housing Association or Council property that is deemed to have one or more spare bedrooms.
- 2.3 The changes in benefits have been seen as a priority by CCBC and a Programme Board was established in July 2012 to oversee projects that would prepare the authority and its residents for the changes. The under-occupation benefit change was a key project within the programme.
- 2.4 This report will provide members with an update on the impacts and provide information on the support provided to residents.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The provision of advice and assistance to help tenants mitigate the impact of welfare reform, links to the following strategic objectives:
- Prosperous Caerphilly – P2: Improve standards of housing and communities, giving appropriate access to services across the county borough.
 - People, Property & Places: A Local Housing Strategy for Caerphilly County Borough (2008/2013) Strategic Aim 6 – *Our aim is to provide good quality, well managed homes in communities where people want to live, and offer people housing choices which meet their needs and aspirations, and*

- The National Housing Strategy - Improving Lives and Communities - Homes in Wales (WG 2010) priority – *Provide housing-related advice, guidance and support, including financial and debt management advice, to help people stay in their homes and to help them to make best use of their income.*

4. THE REPORT

4.1 Impact of the introduction of the under-occupation rules

4.1.1 As previously reported to Members in seminars, Welfare Reform particularly the under occupation rules present significant risks to the delivery of social housing and homelessness functions.

4.1.2 In April 2013 there were 2181 Council tenants affected by the under-occupation changes. The average loss in benefits for claimants were calculated as

- £10.00 per week for the 1696 tenants under occupying by 1 bedroom
- £20.00 per week for the 485 tenants under occupying by 2 bedrooms

In financial terms this equated to an increased annual rent liability of £1.3million.

4.1.3 At the end of December 2013 there were 2063 tenants affected.

- 1635 under occupying by 1 bedroom
- 428 under occupying by 2 bedrooms

4.1.4 An analysis of the above shows an overall net reduction of tenants affected by the under occupation rules of 118. (Base figure of 2181 tenants affected in April 2013 reducing to 2063 tenants affected at the end of December).

This net figure of 118 is broken down as:

An additional 214 new tenants since April 2013 affected by the under occupation rules.

A reduction of 332 pre April 2013 tenants that are no longer affected by the rules. This includes tenants who have transferred to smaller properties, mutually exchanged, gained employment, moved in with relatives and those whose circumstances have changed i.e. family size increased or reached pension credit age.

4.1.5 Caerphilly Homes continues to allocate properties in accordance with need and not in accordance to Welfare Reform under occupancy rules. i.e. tenants could be allocated a property that they would be under occupying by 1 bedroom. An example to illustrate this is a family of husband wife and 2 sons aged 3 and 14 could be allocated a 3 bedroom property policy but would be affected by a 1 bedroom under occupancy reduction. As stated above in 4.1.4, 214 new tenants who have been allocated properties since April 2013 are affected by the under occupation rules.

4.1.6 It has been noted that some housing providers who have adopted an allocations policy that mirrors the welfare reform rules have noticed a large increase in the number of hard to let properties, in the main larger 4 bedrooms and void loss has increased. The number of void properties within Caerphilly Homes has remained fairly static with only a slight increase.

4.1.7 New tenants since April 2013 are not considered eligible to apply for Discretionary Housing Payment as the tenants are considered as having made an informed choice that the property is affordable. A number of these tenants are experiencing financial hardship after moving into the property although their circumstances have not changed and a large percentage have accrued rent arrears. Support and advice is offered by the Tenancy Support staff during home visits however a key part of the support mechanism is Discretionary Housing Payments and this is not available to these tenants.

- 4.1.8 The welfare reform changes have impacted on rent arrears levels. The rent arrears as a percentage of the rent debit at the end of March 2013 was 1.76% this increased to 2.34% at the end of December 2013. However this increase is still within the projected levels included within the housing business plan.
- 4.1.9 The number of cases referred for court action has not increased since April compared with the same period the previous year. The number of evictions has also not materially increased, no evictions have been carried out due to non payment of the under occupation criteria.
- 4.1.10 Substantial additional support is provided to tenants to try to sustain tenancies it is recognised that the under occupation changes has placed additional financial burden onto our tenants however it remains an obligation of the tenants in accordance with their tenancy agreement to pay the rent due. Every effort will be made to support tenants in making whatever adjustments they can to mitigate the effects of the under occupation rules but it is recognised that such adjustments can take time. Where it is evident that the tenant has made no attempt to take mitigating action e.g. accepting support from tenancy support officer, or applying for Discretionary Housing Payment, then a notice of seeking possession may be served.
- 4.1.11 The Wales Audit Office are conducting an Improvement Study on the impact of Welfare reform specifically in Housing and Caerphilly Homes is part of the study.

4.2 Additional support to mitigate the impact

- 4.2.1 A number of recommendations were approved by Council on 19th November 2013 to mitigate the impact of the welfare reform changes.
- 4.2.2 Two support staff were appointed in September 2012 to develop action plans and to assist council tenants. Two further officers were appointed to the same role in April 2013. These officers were recruited from Benefits, Landlord Services and Rents and have an excellent skill mix.
- 4.2.3 The Tenancy Support Officers offer face to face support to Caerphilly Homes tenants in their own homes. A detailed contact form is completed with tenants and support and appropriate signposting is offered relevant to each tenants circumstances. This may include
- Opportunities for mutual exchanges
 - Assistance in the completion of transfer application/registering on Homeswapper (electronic mutual exchange system)
 - Assessment and help to maximise their income
 - Assessment and help for savings with utilities
 - Budgeting and basic financial advice referral to Caerphilly County CAB
 - Debt advice referral to Caerphilly County CAB
 - Employment signposting and specific referral to Jobcentre Plus (JCP)
 - Signposting to other internal service areas, programmes and initiatives (e.g. families first/team around the family, private sector housing, supporting people.
 - Providing assistance to tenants to apply for Discretionary Housing Payments
 - Assisting tenants to claim a payment from the Discretionary Assistance Fund
- 4.2.4 As well as appointing four new members of staff to the Rents team a number of activities have been undertaken to ensure that frontline staff are aware of the reforms and are able to offer advice to tenants. This included: briefings and training sessions/money and debt advice training facilitated by the Caerphilly County CAB so staff have information to hand about the most appropriate help and advice to provide or signpost tenants towards.

- 4.2.5 In response to the Welfare Reform Act, changes to the allocation policy were reported to Caerphilly Homes Task Group in February 2013. The allocations policy was amended to allow management discretion to overlook deduction of penalty points on grounds of tenancy breaches. This includes rent arrears and property conditions and would support transfers and mutual exchanges to enable tenants to move to more suitable accommodation.
- 4.2.6 Housing Services staff are also actively promoting mutual exchange opportunities for tenants. Events are to be held in March to encourage mutual exchanges between our residents. The event will give tenants the opportunity to meet other residents who want to move home.
- 4.2.7 Funding has also recently been identified which can be used to develop a scheme to assist tenants in financial hardship with removal costs. It is anticipated that the financial assessment will be linked to the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme to determine eligibility for this funding.
- 4.2.8 The Department for Work and Pensions has recently announced that if a tenant has been occupying their home since 1996, have not moved house in this time and have been in receipt of Housing Benefit continuously, except for short breaks of less than 4 weeks, they will not be affected by the spare room subsidy from 1 April 2013. Within days of receipt of the circular from the DWP notifying us, potential cases were identified and referred to the Council Benefits Section for checking. As at 14/02/14 270 cases were identified and £86k has been refunded to affected tenants.
- 4.2.9 We have recently been informed that revised regulations have been laid before parliament on 05/02/14 and the "loop hole" exempting tenants from the under occupation rules described in 4.2.7 will be closed. The regulation is expected to come into force from 03/03/14.

4.3 **Support outcomes**

- 4.3.1 As at the end of January 2014 1754 tenants have been visited in their homes and provided with relevant support. Considerable savings for Council tenants have been identified and other specific support and referral (e.g. debt advice) has been provided and evidenced.
- 4.3.2 In relation to savings for water costs
- 445 tenants were assisted to apply for a water meter with estimated saving in total of £44k (average saving of £100.00 per tenant)
 - 810 tenants were assisted to apply for water assist with potential savings of £250.00 per annum
- 4.3.3 Caerphilly Homes rents staff have a close working relationship with local food banks and 55 food parcels were delivered to tenants who were recognized as in need.
- 4.3.4 The tenancy support staff assisting 20 tenants with young children to claim a grant from Save the Children's Eat Sleep and Play scheme, the grants included payments for cots, beds, and prams.
- 4.3.5 The Tenancy Support staff arranged appointments for 294 tenants to receive money and debt advice with the Caerphilly County CAB.
- 4.3.6 495 tenants have received expert energy saving advice of which 263 tenants qualified for the Warm Homes Discount (£135 annual saving per tenant).
- 4.3.7 Caerphilly Homes work in partnership with the Caerphilly County CAB in delivering money and debt advice to tenants. A review was undertaken of the debt advice service for a three month period last year and headline figures indicated that of the 65 tenants that attended the appointments in the period they had a total debt value between them of £595k. This was broken down as £105k priority debt (e.g. rent arrears, court fines, council tax or utility arrears) and non priority debt of £490k (e.g. credit cards, pay day loans, door stop lenders, catalogues

and personal loans). The level of debt is very concerning and the majority cannot be attributed to the introduction of the under occupation rules.

- 4.3.8 Caerphilly County CAB provide case work support to these tenants which would range from negotiating on their behalf with creditors to a formal debt remedy e.g. a debt relief order or bankruptcy.
- 4.3.9 As part of the Tenancy Support visits, officers refer tenants to a “fast track” employment support process with the Job Centre Plus. At the end of December 240 tenants have been referred, outcomes of these referrals include 30 tenants have entered employment and 45 accessed additional training.
- 4.3.10 The tenancy support staff assisted 846 tenants to claim discretionary housing payment 84% (700 tenants) were successful and discretionary housing payments were paid to cover the shortfall of the under occupation reduction.
- 4.3.11 Tenancy Support Officers and Rents staff have received full training in relation to welfare benefit entitlements. 205 tenants were recognized as potentially not receiving their full benefit entitlement and referral was made to either the dedicated Rents Welfare Benefits Officer or partnership agencies e.g. CAB. For the period April 2013 to December 2013 additional benefits of £244k was identified for Council Tenants. This included additional DLA/PIP, attendance allowance, pensions credit, ESA etc.
- 4.3.12 Following the Tenancy Support Officer visit a selection of residents received a follow up telephone survey to obtain their views on the visit and whether they found the information, support and advice helpful:
- 93% of tenants surveyed found the information provided either helpful or very helpful
75% felt the advice in relation to money management either helped a lot or a little
- 4.3.13 Welsh Government are actively encouraging local authorities to develop better partnerships with the private rented sector (PRS), a housing sector which has now become numerically equivalent to social housing across Wales.
- 4.3.14 It is vital that we have a robust private rented sector as part of our strategy in mitigating the impact of the under occupation rules. We are continuing to develop good working relationships with our private landlords through support and assistance for themselves and their tenants. Our weekly Housing Pathways meetings for homeless prevention are oversubscribed however, through this positive partnership working we have recently been ranked 3rd best all Wales performance for family homelessness prevention.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment is not needed because the issues covered are for information purposes only, therefore the Council’s full EIA process does not need to be applied.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 This report highlights the financial implications as a result of the Welfare Reform Act, namely rent arrears and void loss, as well as the additional resource required to support affected tenants.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no direct personnel implications.

8. CONSULTATIONS

8.1 Consultation has taken place with Officers listed as consultees.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 That the report be noted.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The report contains information for the consideration of the Policy and Resources Committee.

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 Housing Acts and Local Government Acts.

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Lesley Allen, Principal Accountant
Sandra Isaacs, Rents Manager
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Alessandra Veronese, Programme Manager/E-Government Team Leader.
Dave Regan, Lead Officer (Benefits & Finance) WRA.
Amanda Main, Acting Benefits Manager

Background Papers:
Report to Council 19th November 2013 – Notice of Motion (Bedroom tax)



**POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –
24TH JULY 2013**

SUBJECT: WELFARE REFORM PROGRAMME UPDATE

REPORT BY: ACTING DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES AND SECTION 151

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To inform Members of the progress of the Welfare Reform Programme.

2. SUMMARY

2.1 The changes in benefits introduced by the UK Government via the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and Localised Finance Act 2011 have been seen as a priority by CCBC.

2.2 A Programme Board was established in July 2012 to oversee projects that would prepare the authority and its residents for the changes.

2.3 The report is providing information on the relevant activities to-date.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

3.1 This report provides an update on some of the Authority support activities directly linked to CCBC Improvement Objectives and the Caerphilly Delivers – Single Integrated Plan in relation to the Council anti-poverty strategy.

4. THE REPORT

4.1 Introduction

The wide ranging changes introduced by the U.K. government to the welfare system, including Universal Credit, benefit cap, council tax reduction scheme, social sector size criteria housing benefit reduction and other general welfare changes¹ have been seen as a priority by CCBC from a very early stage.

A Programme Board of senior management and a cross-functional team was established to oversee and coordinate initiatives in July 2012.

The core team is made of officers from all key service areas, including Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefits Section, Housing, Community Regeneration / Communities First, Social Services, Supporting People, Customer Services, Education/Children and Young People

¹ The latest timeline of the main changes is attached in Appendix 1 for information.

Partnership.

The overall aim of the programme is to ensure that the Local Authority and its residents are adequately prepared for the impact of the Welfare Reform Act and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

The programme currently includes four projects: 1) Welfare Reform Act and Council tax reduction Scheme Awareness; 2) Under-occupation (also known as "Bedroom tax"); 3) Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot; 4) Local Support Service Framework.

The programme team has specifically been working on:

- (i) Raising the awareness of the forthcoming benefits changes, both internally and externally to ensure the impact is fully understood and allow sufficient time to prepare for the transition
- (ii) Identifying, engaging with and preparing front-line services that will have a direct contact with affected residents and will be directly affected by the changes in their service delivery
- (iii) Identifying and planning contact with the affected residents to inform them of all changes, implement those that are within the area of responsibility of CCBC and offer the relevant support in the transition to the new benefits rules.
 - This will be achieved also by means of the pilot run in partnership with the DWP in the months prior to the introduction of the Universal Credit. The pilot is aiming at learning on how the Local Authority can better support locally the residents claiming working age benefits once migrated into the Universal Credit being introduced gradually from October 2013.

The activities for each of the above points are summarized below.

4.2 Raising Awareness

The initiatives to raise awareness are numerous and have been the initial focus of the programme. Below are some of the main ones.

- From July through to October, awareness sessions were held with members, the local service board, voluntary sector, leadership team, staff and management (over 500 attendees), local tenants' participation strategy group, head teachers, Children and Young People Partnership board.
- Early in September, two new pages and a FAQ's document were created and added to the corporate website (www.caerphilly.gov.uk/benefitschanges and www.caerphilly.gov.uk/underoccupation), followed up by relevant intranet news item, email to all internal users and relevant press release. Subsequently and to provide more clarity for residents a page to highlight changes and news relevant to the welfare reform was added (www.caerphilly.gov.uk/benefitschangesnews).
- Targeted briefing was undertaken within all teams in social services and a task and finish group established to review risk and impact for the directorate of Social Services.
- A workshop organised with staff and external organisations in relation to the future launch of the on line housing and council tax benefit claims was also used to provide a briefing on the benefit changes and engage with key external stakeholders, such as Housing Associations and Support Providers.

- Specific events were and are being organised in the community to promote awareness of the welfare reform changes (more detail below).
- A specific leaflet was created to inform about the UK Government Changes to the Housing Benefits
- Affected residents were also sent appropriate letters accompanied by the leaflet
- Presence in two “Newline” editions (November 2012 and March 2013)
- A programme of visits to the under-occupying council tenants started in November and is still underway (more detail below).

4.3 Frontline Services And Residents Preparation, Specifically For The Under Occupation In The Social Housing Rented Sector²

The latest data shows that Caerphilly CBC has approximately 2,741 social housing tenants who will be affected by the under occupation, of these 560 are Registered Social Landlords (RSL) tenants and 2,181 are council tenants.

Of the 2,181 council tenants affected by the change 78% are under occupying by at least one bedroom and the rest (22%) by two or more. Under-occupancy will reduce the housing benefit of these tenants by 14% of the eligible rent for 1 bedroom (on average £11 per week for Caerphilly) and 25% of the eligible rent for 2 bedrooms (on average £21 per week for Caerphilly). These figures and others are included in Appendix 2.

Apart from the updating of the website, a leaflet to explain changes and to signpost tenants was also developed and made available to support providers and Caerphilly Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), and at key sites such as our libraries, customer first centres and GP surgeries.

Early in November 2012 the leaflet was also sent to the claimants identified as under occupying by the Benefits section together with the letter announcing the change and asking for confirmation of the household composition details.

The same information was included in the November issue of our council residents’ newsletter “Newline” and subsequently a short version of it appeared in the March edition as a reminder.

The Benefits section also notified all Registered Social Landlords operating in the county borough with their list of tenants potentially affected by the under occupation rule to enable them to offer timely support.

All Rents staff have been briefed on offering the correct support, information and signposting when contacted by tenants over the phone. This contact is suggested both in the leaflet and on our website relevant pages.

Two additional staff were appointed in September 2012 by Housing to implement changes and assist council tenants in the transition to the new rule and two further officers started in the same role (Tenancy Support Officer) from April 2013.

After having carried out the appropriate desk analysis of available records, the Tenancy Support Officers started visiting and are currently offering face to face support to council tenants in their own homes. They developed a plan for visiting those who appear as under occupying to directly engage with the prioritised affected tenants between October 2012 and April 2013 and with the entire group soon after.

² This change, recently referred to as “spare room subsidy” only applies to social housing rented sector tenants of working age.

Also using a bespoke interactive map, briefing note and contact form, the Tenancy Support Officers offer support and appropriate signposting relevant to each tenant's circumstances including:-

- Opportunities for mutual exchange
- Assistance in the completion of transfer applications/registering on *Homeswapper* (electronic mutual exchange system)
- Assessment and help to maximise their income
- Assessment and help for savings with utilities
- Budgeting and basic financial advice referral to CAB
- Debt advice referral to CAB
- Signposting and referral for digital support sessions (see below Universal Credit Pilot section)
- Employment signposting and specific referral to Jobcentre Plus (JCP)
- Signposting/referral to other internal service areas, programmes and initiatives (e.g. Families First / Team Around the Family, Genesis / Bridges into Work, Private Sector Housing etc.)

Key outcomes of the visits so far are:-

- Face-to-face support provided to 757 council tenants
- Promotion of Welsh Water Assist during the visits resulted in £77,000 reduction in water costs for tenants (overall the saving generated for all tenants in 2012/2013 equates to £200K)
- 97 referrals to CAB for money and debt advice appointments held in local offices with 90% attendance rate
- 55 referrals for fast-track employment support to JCP
- 203 applications for water meters (average of £100 savings per annum)
- 495 tenants received expert energy saving advice
- 241 were assisted in completing a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) application

In conjunction to the above visits, the rents staff have contacted all council tenants who appear as over occupying and assisted them to sign on to Home Swapper (mutual exchange) with significant success.

A series of events, organised by Regeneration / Communities First, have been held throughout the county borough for Caerphilly CBC residents in a number of local venues, e.g. schools and community centres, where concerns can be addressed via questions and answers to Housing staff and other subject matter experts. Alongside specific events for social housing tenants, Communities First has also organised general welfare reform awareness events.

A proposal for establishing a Common Housing Register and Common Allocation Scheme has been endorsed in principal by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

A plan to further liaise with and to establish a key external stakeholders group is being finalised. This will include Welsh Government, WLGA, Third Sector via GAVO and Supporting People Providers, CCAB, JCP, neighbouring Local Authorities and housing associations. The objective of the group is to share our progress both relevant to the Welfare Reform wider programme and to the Universal Credit Local Authority Led pilot (see below) as well as gathering similar valuable experience from our colleagues in the group. The initial Information Exchange meeting is being organised for 22nd July 2013.

A data-sharing agreement between Benefits department and Social Services is currently being finalised to enable the social services department to ensure known vulnerable individuals are aware and prepared for the changes introduced by the Welfare Reform Act.

4.4 DWP Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot Project

The 12 pilots part of the UK wide programme, albeit entailing different activities, are all aiming at generating learning on how the local authority can better support locally the residents, claiming working age benefits, once migrated into the Universal Credit³, which is to be introduced gradually from October 2013. Their objective is to explore how local expertise can support residents in preparing for the implementation of the Universal Credit.

The County Borough of Caerphilly has a growing population of around 178,800 making it the 5th largest local authority area in Wales by population.

The proportion of economically active people in the county borough is significantly lower than the Wales or GB averages (Caerphilly 70.3%, Wales 72.5%, GB 76.1%). The proportion of people in the county borough claiming JSA is significantly higher than average (Caerphilly 5.4%, Wales 4.15%, GB 3.9%). Levels of deprivation in the county borough are higher than the Wales average over a range of indicators.

According to a recognized demographic segmentation dataset, 50% of the households in Caerphilly CB have a low or very low potential to move to self-service on the internet, with less than 20% having a high or very high self-service indicator. According to the same dataset just over 60% of households in our territory are principally receptive to face-to-face interactions.

The Digital Inclusion data provided by Experian (year 2011) shows Caerphilly ranking 15 out of 22 Local Authority with 36.57% of all adults population, equal to 49,285 adults, defined as “digital excluded” (Rank 1 Cardiff 25.55%).

In light of the above demographic overview, the Caerphilly pilot focuses on coordinating existing initiatives and partner organizations to ensure:

- Digitally excluded groups within our communities are supported in the journey to “online” interaction.
- Appropriate signposting takes place, where necessary, to support access to employment.
- Support is provided to our residents to improve their money management skills.

The delivery team is made of officers from key service areas (Community Regeneration/Communities First, Housing Benefit Section, Customer First, Libraries, Housing and ICT) and key external partners, in particular Jobcentre Plus and Caerphilly CAB.

For the duration of the pilot, the existing Authority’s resources are being assisted by 4 newly appointed staff (1 Project Manager and Co-ordinator and 3 Project Officers) whose aim is to coordinate activities and ensure effective collaborative working in order that staffing and other resources are used effectively for the project objectives.

Underpinning the pilot is the roll out of the “E-Claim”, electronic form that allows inputting and submitting the housing benefits claim online, and the online Change of Circumstances form, that have been live on CCBC website since January 2013. The initial take-up has been very encouraging.

Drawing on the experience and resources of Communities 2.0, the residents who need to claim or are engaged in other ways, are offered and signposted to sessions to improve their IT skills. Some drop in open sessions are available at specific days (Digital Fridays) in some local libraries to enable an easy initial referral process and residents who wish will also be able to self-refer to IT Skills sessions via a specifically designed leaflet.

Key to the digital skill improvement work stream is the identification, recruitment and formal

³ This change only applies to citizens claiming working age benefits and tax credit

training of volunteers in the local community who take up the role of Digital Champion. The recruitment and training by *Get Caerphilly Online* is currently ongoing.

The team, in partnership with JCP, has designed a streamlined referral process to help claimants in the search and preparation for employment or to broaden their opportunities to increase their current working hours. To the end of April, 31 referrals have been made with 2 residents finding employment while 6 entered training programmes. Of the remaining, 12 residents already received support through the Work Programme.

Caerphilly CAB is the partner organisation both to deliver money advice and budgeting skills to residents referred during the pilot and to deliver training to the local authority front-line staff for basic financial advice to residents. To the end of May a total of 160 staff had undergone the training, including partners such as GAVO, JCP and local credit union.

A rigorous plan for monitoring progress and capturing the lessons learned is in place. The project runs from October 2012 to September 2013 but a proposal for an extension to December 2013 is currently being considered by the Minister for Welfare Reform and Treasury.

As far as the roll out of the Universal Credit is concerned, there is no definitive detailed migration timetable available yet.

4.5 Local Support Service Framework

According to the DWP with the introduction of the Universal Credit, the majority of the people will be able to “make their claim online and payments will be made monthly and direct to the household” but supplementary local support will be necessary to support claimants with additional needs (for example “personal budgeting support”) and the Local Support Service Framework deals with the design of the additional local support service provision. The framework was published for consultation in February 2013.

Representatives of the Programme Board are in contact with the DWP via the appropriate reference group and directly with Jobcentre Plus to progress with the discussion and preparation around the Local Support Service Framework.

4.6 Council Tax Reduction Scheme

From 1st April 2013, as a result of UK legislation, council tax benefit has been abolished and the responsibility for council tax support has passed to the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government has introduced a national scheme which the council have adopted⁴.

Although the funding from the UK Government has been reduced, the Welsh Government have met the shortfall of £22 million for 2013/14. This will ensure that those eligible will continue to receive up to 100% of the agreed entitlement for 2013/14.

As part of the process in adopting the new scheme, we undertook an extensive consultation exercise in December. This exercise included writing directly to the 20,000+ households affected and asking their views. Approximately 50% of those affected were of pensionable age. Over 1,150 responses were received, of which 935 were aged 55+.

The Welsh Government will be reviewing both the scheme and the levels of funding in the future. A proposal has been put forward to Local Authorities by Welsh Government for 2014/2015 requesting Local Authorities to consider a 50-50 funding arrangement in respect of the shortfall in CTRS.

Officers will consider options in due course when more is known about the proposal and a

⁴ See relevant report to Special Council on 29th January 2013.

report will be presented to members.

4.7 Other Welfare Changes (DLA To PIP And Benefit Cap)

- 4.7.1 Disability Living Allowance will gradually be replaced by **Personal Independence Payments** over the next 3 years. The DWP website contains all the relevant information regarding these changes and there is a link from our website to this information. It is clear from DWP's own impact analysis that a considerable percentage of existing claimants will see a reduction when they move to P.I.P. For the majority of claimants this may not happen until October 2015.

Awareness sessions are taking place with staff, voluntary organisations and the third sector and will continue, in order that we ensure that support staff and support organisations are able to provide accurate, up to date and timely information, as well as appropriate advice and guidance.

When any relevant information leaflets/documentation is available from the DWP, we will ensure that this information is available via a link from our website and, where appropriate, hard copies are available both with support workers and organisations and offices where there is public access (e.g. civic buildings, libraries, and customer first).

- 4.7.2 The details of the **benefit cap** are available on our website. The latest information from the DWP would indicate that the cap would be implemented from 15 July 2013 with all relevant claimants capped by the end of September 2013. All those affected will have already been notified of the changes by DWP and that they will be affected by these changes.

In Caerphilly the latest information is that less than 80 households in receipt of housing benefit will be affected. We should be receiving up to date information from the DWP this month and this information will be used to contact those affected. The contact will be generally via the landlords' tenancy support officer or a member of our housing department with the aim being to offer effective support and guidance.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no equalities implications.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no financial implications. The Welfare Reform and relevant preparation activities have financial implications that have been and will be detailed in other suitable reports.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The report is for information only and has therefore no personnel implications. The Welfare Reform and relevant preparation activities have personnel implications that have been and will be detailed in other suitable reports.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 This report includes all consultations as listed below.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the report is noted for information.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The report contains information for the consideration of the Policy and Resources Committee.

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 This report is for information only. The Programme activities described in this report are to comply with the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Local Government Finance Bill 2011.

Author: Alessandra Veronese, Programme Manager Welfare Reform / E-Gov Team Leader

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David Regan, Lead Finance Officer (WRA)

Sandra Isaacs, Rents Manager

Richard Beasley, Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot Project Co-ordinator

Appendices:

Appendix 1 Welfare Reform Benefits Changes Latest Timeline

Appendix 2 CCBC Figures

UNIVERSAL CREDIT LOCAL AUTHORITY LED PILOT KEY OUTCOMES

SYNOPSIS

The Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot in Caerphilly was delivered as part of a wider welfare reform programme in the Borough. Activities within the pilot delivered in partnership with Get Caerphilly On-line, CAB and Jobcentre Plus.

The project, introducing and testing new support services to help residents prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit expected in 2016, was underpinned by signposting and referral (triage) to a range of support services including the partners Jobcentre Plus and CAB. Through the use of a newly developed contact and assessment questionnaire, the Tenancy Support Officers played a key role in referring and signposting tenants to the new, and existing, support. The contact questionnaire enabled a consistent approach to each visit and ensured that relevant information (e.g. informed consent) was recorded

The main objectives of the Pilot were focussed on three areas:

- Digital Support
- Financial Advice Support
- Employment Access Support

KEY FEATURES

Digital Support

- Partnership with Get Caerphilly On-line
- 18 libraries with 220 free public access PCs
- Get Caerphilly On-line informal drop-in sessions (Digital Fridays) delivered in six libraries
- Recruitment, training and development of volunteers (digital champions) to deliver sessions
- On-line Housing Benefit and Change of Circumstance Forms available on website
- New CRM telephone script to promote and encourage use of on-line forms

Financial Advice/Support

- Partnership with CAB

- Tenancy Support Officer visits to tenants affected by under-occupation
- Assessment of tenants immediate situation (social/financial)
- referral to debt/budgeting advice
- referral to in depth debt support (casework)
- awareness raising of financial implications of the welfare changes amongst frontline staff

Employment Access Support

- Partnership with JCP
- Fast-track Employment Support
- JCP signposting and referral to other services (e.g. digital)

KEY OUTCOMES

Digital Inclusion

- 624 individuals supported
- 2,688 support contacts
- 20 volunteers delivering sessions in 3 libraries
- 3,253 housing benefit and Change of Circumstances (CoC) transactions being completed online
- 60% housing benefits/CoC claims made on-line (equal reduction in paper copies of housing benefit forms being issued)

Financial Advice Support

- 1,754 tenants visited by TSOs and provided with budgeting advice
- 846 DHP assessments have been completed with 700 being successful
- £286,555 saved by tenants through reduction of expenditure on utilities (Welsh Water Assist, Warm Home Discounts, Water Meter installation)
- 229 tenants referred to CAB for debt/budgeting advice
- 65 tenants referred to CAB for Debt support (casework) with £595,995.50 debt being identified
 - average £7,500 debt per client

- 238 frontline staff attended training to enable them to provide advice/signposting to residents

Employment Access Support

- 240 tenants referred to JCP fast track support
 - 30 entered employment
 - 45 undertaken training
- Improved partnership working with JCP at senior and frontline staff level



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 16TH APRIL 2013

SUBJECT: DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS 2013/14

REPORT BY: ACTING DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES & SECTION 151

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Members about Discretionary Housing Payments.
- 1.2 To inform Members of the Discretionary Housing Payment allocation received from Central Government for 2013/14 and the proposed criteria that will be used to award these payments.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Discretionary Housing payments (DHPs) are, at present, additional payments made towards rent, council tax, or both. They are only paid to customers already receiving housing and/or council tax benefit who need more help with their housing costs over and above their benefit award.
- 2.2 To help Local Authorities (LAs) manage the impact of the Housing Benefit (HB) reforms announced in the June 2010 budget, Ministers agreed to increase DHP funding to £30 million in 2011/12 and to £60 million annually for 2012/13. The total funding available for 2013/14 is £155m.
- 2.3 Caerphilly County Borough Council, like every other Council, is given a fixed amount each year by the Government to pay DHPs. The allocation that Caerphilly will receive for 2013/14 is £292,597. This has increased considerably in comparison to the allocation for 2012/13 which was £66,516.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The payment of Housing and Council Tax benefits is a key element of the Council's anti-poverty and regeneration strategies.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 Since 2 July 2001, DHPs have allowed Authorities to help those entitled to Housing Benefit (HB) or Council Tax Benefit (CTB) who, in their opinion, require further financial assistance with housing costs.
- 4.2 From April 2013 DHPs will only be available to those entitled to HB, for help towards rent, as CTB will end 31.03.13 and will be replaced by the Council tax Reduction scheme, which is not a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) related benefit. Therefore DHPs cannot be used

for help towards paying Council Tax.

- 4.3 LAs have a responsibility to ensure that this fund is utilised effectively so that it is paid to those who have the most need. Decisions on assessments are made with reference to the relevant DWP regulations. These are the Discretionary Financial Assistance Regulations 2001 [SI 2001/1167]. There is no set criterion but each claim has to go through a financial income and expenditure assessment. LAs have a duty to act fairly, reasonably and consistently when considering entitlement to a DHP. Ensuring that the most vulnerable receive the financial assistance they need.
- 4.4 The current criteria for dealing with DHPs has proved to be successful in that the allocation for 2012/13 has been used effectively and has been kept to budget. It is therefore the intention to keep to this criterion and involve partners e.g. social sector landlords and supporting bodies to help in the process. The criteria will be flexible as discretion is the key. But it is important that guidelines are in place so that all claimants are treated fairly.
- 4.5 The increase in DHP funding is intended to reduce the impact of the cuts in benefits expenditure and the changes brought in by the Housing Benefit Reforms reform e.g. Under Occupation for Social Sector Tenants, The Benefit Cap and Local Housing Allowance (LHA) amounts calculated at the rate of CPI. For example there are approximately 3000 Social Sector Tenants that will be affected by the under occupation and their HB will be cut by approximately £10 or £20 per week. It is evident that the DHP funding will not be enough to help everyone affected. Therefore it is imperative that the Authority uses this funding effectively to help those who need it most.
- 4.6 Before an assessment of DHP is made a review of the HB entitlement will be undertaken to ensure that the customer is receiving the maximum amount of benefit they are entitled to.
- 4.7 The DHP assessment will then be to evidence if there is financial hardship. Information gathered regarding income and expenditure will be assessed to establish if there is a shortfall in the amount of rent and council tax to be paid. There must be evidence that due to financial hardship the claimant has difficulties in paying the shortfall in the rent.
- 4.8 It is important to remember that DHPs are a short-term aid towards long-term sustainable solutions. This type of payment cannot be made indefinitely. It is fundamental when a DHP is awarded that a sustainable solution is sort. Therefore it is imperative that claimants work with their landlords and the support available so that financial advice can be given or affordable accommodation sort.
- 4.9 Most claims will be paid for a period of 13 weeks at which point a review will be under taken. The period of award can be extended for a further 13 weeks if support is in place and a sustainable solution is being sort. Each claim will be taken on its merit and decisions to extend payments beyond this period will be considered.
- 4.10 Quarterly meetings will be held by the DHP working group, which currently consists members of Caerphilly's Benefit Section, Rent Section, Homelessness Section and Housing Associations, who will discuss and review criteria in order to guarantee that the DHP fund is utilised effectively and is paid to those who need it most.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This report is for information purposes only, so the Council's full Equalities Impact Assessment process does not need to be applied.
- 5.2 Reduction in HB and wider financial hardships can affect certain groups in the community to a much greater degree, such as older people or people with disabilities, however, CCBC already considers such issues when providing advice and guidance and works with the CAB to provide financial capability sessions (open to all) and maximising income sessions,

specifically aimed at the 50+ age range normally, though some sessions in 2010/11 were targeted at younger people.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no financial implications to the Authority providing there is no overspend of the amount allocated by DWP.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no personnel implications arising from this report.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 There are no consultation responses that have not been included in this report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 The Authority continues to allocate this small amount of funding in accordance with the guidelines.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To ensure that the allocation received from The Department for Work and Pensions for the DHPs is used fairly to help the most vulnerable who require financial assistance in the future.

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 Decisions on assessments are made with reference to the relevant Departments for Work and Pensions regulations. These are the *Discretionary Financial Assistance Regulations 2001 [SI 2001/1167]*.

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