

# Edinburgh's no eviction strategy not echoed in East Lothian



The City of Edinburgh Council decided last week to take a stance on council tenants who are in arrears of rent. Their stance is one of cooperation and avoidance rather than legal enforcement, where the tenants cooperate with the council in trying to address any debts due. At the Corporate Policy and Strategy Committee meeting there was a lengthy discussion by elected members, following deputations by UNITE and Edinburgh Tenants Federation, which were listened to intently.

A total of £1.3m has been set aside by the council to deal with those cases where tenants might encounter difficulties and hardship, and a further £360,000 has been reserved for advice services such as CHAI and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

The council decided that they will not evict any tenants who are in arrears as a result of the introduction of new welfare reforms by the UK Government, otherwise known as the bedroom tax. Councillor Ricky Henderson, Convener of Health, Social Care and Housing, reminded the committee that the report being considered was generated by a previous Green Group motion. "We decided to adopt the no eviction rule, and that is the reason for the report. Tenants could find themselves in difficulties with arrears as a result of the bedroom tax. We could not countenance as a council pursuing tenants whose only offence was that the UK Government had moved the goalposts. But this is not without consequences. It has implications on jobs and income in our rental sector.

"There are a lot of other mitigating measures and we feel that external partners might make some practical suggestions. We

have a lot of challenges ahead and the welfare reforms implemented throughout the UK will have a significant impact on the city.

“It is essential that people make every effort to pay their rent as this funds housing services and investment. However, this decision will protect our tenants from losing their home due to the impact of the ‘bedroom tax’. We will do all that we can to support the people most affected by these changes and our ‘no eviction’ policy is an important step towards this.”

The council is also seeking an early meeting with the UK Government to put forward the implications of the welfare reforms in Edinburgh.


✘ Cameron Rose, Conservative Group Leader, who opposed the motion, said:-“I would like to offer my thanks to the deputations for all of the information. Allow me to take a moment or two to paint the big picture. The fact of the matter is that the welfare bill has a trajectory which is stratospheric. We have increased the overall bill, but the new measures taken do not reduce the welfare bill at all. What is happening is that there is a reduction in the increase of welfare spending. This year the absolute amount will reduce slightly, but over the next few years the increase will be reduced. That is all.”

“There are a number of tenants who welcome the reforms and who look at the current unfairness. There are those who are in overcrowded accommodation but are unable to move because there are a number of people who are being subsidised for rooms which they are not occupying.

“There are a lot of people who cannot get on the list due to under-occupation. This is an issue of fairness. We have had an average of 500 one bedroom houses becoming available which of course is just not enough. Some will be in financial difficulty and some will be able to pay the extra. Let us not

be under any illusion about this. There will be difficult cases but money has been allocated to the problem. I hope that addresses some of the principles. Part of the motion by Councillor Henderson is a proposal to have a monitoring group, but we already have that in place. It seems to me that this will be a political monitoring group. I am not sure that the creation of another monitoring group will help those in great financial need or in need of other support.

“The 500 places needed will increase as time goes on, but people have told me that they are already planning to move, so there is more housing stock going to become available.

Councillor Joanna Mowat, the Conservative Councillor for  the City Centre ward said:- “ I second this amendment. We are trying to rein in the welfare budget because we see how much it has grown over the last ten years. I agree that it is better to be involved with people before they get into trouble with rent, but we agree that there is moral good in the new regime. The council has put a lot of money into getting people into work so that they have a positive destination when they leave education. This is another strand to that. We recognise what the council is trying to do, but we believe that you have to retain the ability to evict tenants. You send out mixed messages if not, and I feel that we are locking tenants into a cycle of debt.

Green Councillor Steve Burgess, who supported the Capital Coalition motion which was eventually passed, said:-“It is absurd and immoral to try and evict people when there is nowhere for them to go. The key to protecting people from arrears is the direct engagement with tenants who fall into arrears.”

Councillor Lesley Hinds accused the Tories of trying to divide people. The myths being rehearsed by the UK government are staggering. If you look at the facts, then the majority of people claiming housing benefit are in work. Is it then a

result of low wages? To keep on saying that those on benefits are scroungers is the wrong philosophy. The only one bedroom houses in my ward in Drylaw are sheltered houses. So do they have to move to other areas? That is the reality on the ground Councillor Rose! They have to claim benefits as they simply do not have enough money coming into their household.

“This scheme is divisive and cruel. What we have to do is pick up the pieces of the legislation. We care about what happens to people in Edinburgh unlike the Conservatives.”

Councillor Paul Godzik said:-“The deputations outlined a few genuine concerns about the effect of this policy. It is about ensuring that families have adequate and appropriate support. I do think there is a need for welfare reform, but this is not sensible reform. It is an attack on the poorest by a Chancellor who wants to make a political point. I think that is disgraceful.”

Councillor Richard Lewis:-” This is reformed at the same time as giving millionaires tax cuts, and there is a funeral for a Prime Minister costing millions in London. This is philosophy first and financial prudence second.”

The ‘no eviction’ policy has been adopted elsewhere in Scotland including Dundee, Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire.

In East Lothian however the situation is quite different. Labour and Tory councillors in East Lothian have combined to vote down an SNP motion that would have guaranteed no evictions because of the bedroom tax.

SNP Group Leader, Councillor Stuart Currie, said:-“It is frankly a disgrace that both Labour and the Tories have become as one on the issue of the bedroom tax. Their council deputy leader even told the meeting that he supported the welfare changes and that Iain Duncan Smith had been welcomed to East Lothian recently. Today they could have voted for a motion

which not only would guarantee no evictions but also agreed to support campaign groups who want the Bedroom Tax scrapped.

“Today was a sad day for East Lothian but also a sad day for the Labour Party in this East Lothian. It would seem that they are so reliant on the support of the Tories on the council that they will not raise a finger to support a motion that would have given support to the many people affected who we represent. Today Labour let down the people.”