UNISON briefing for organisers and activists

Abolish the bedroom tax now

Along with nearly 60% of the public (National Housing Federation Poll September 2013) UNISON believes we can’t wait until a 2015 general election to end the unfair and unworkable bedroom tax. The mounting misery and hardship being caused to tenants, safety stresses on housing workers and financial impact on landlords and councils are not a price worth paying for a policy which is self-defeating.

1. Tenants will be forced out of their homes or into arrears or debt
   650,000 households will be hit with a 14% or 25% loss of housing benefit for having a spare room. Since its introduction in April 2013 it’s estimated that 80,000 households (50,000 council and 30,000 social housing tenants) are now in rent arrears due to the bedroom tax.

2. Disabled people will be hardest hit
   400,000 (60%) of households hit by the bedroom tax have disabled adults or children. Disabled people are more likely to need their own room and to need benefits. They could lose homes that are specially adapted to suit their conditions.

3. It doesn’t recognise the reality or complexity of ordinary people’s (family) lives
   Single parents, children and women fleeing domestic violence will be disadvantaged. People will be forced to move miles from places and people they know and love and many won’t be able to afford the cost of moving and furnishing a new home.

4. There’s nowhere to move to - the supply of smaller accommodation doesn’t exist
   If people do move they are likely to move to private landlords in the private sector where housing rents cost more and any government savings will be lost. Data from 107 local authorities in 2013 showed 86,000 households had so far been forced to look for one-bedroom homes, of which only 33,000 had become available in the past year.

5. Increased rent arrears will make it more difficult for housing associations to financially plan and provide community services
   Service provision, such as vulnerable care and children’s play provision will be adversely affected. Alongside cuts to services, reductions in workforce housing rents may have to be increased.

6. Eviction threats and eviction proceedings for house possession aren’t the answer
   Evictions are time consuming, expensive and don’t solve housing shortage problems or people falling into rent arrears. The personal stress and increased debt (rise in food banks and use of loan sharks) to hold off evictions is taking its toll, particularly on families and individuals already suffering from poverty, health and mental health problems.

7. Housing workers need increased protection, training, improved support and proper pay in supporting tenants dealing with the consequences of the bedroom tax and other welfare reforms
   Stress is growing for staff tackling bedroom tax problems. There is a growth in verbal abuse and physical threats to housing workers dealing with the bedroom tax and other welfare reforms.
Dealing with debt management issues needs resourcing. Adequate staffing levels need to be provided to enable excessive workloads to be tackled. Staff need to be properly trained to support tenants, especially if they have to give out debt and welfare advice.

Working together to make a difference

By working jointly with other unions, employers and social housing providers, tenants associations, community and welfare support and councils we can demonstrate the hidden costs, impracticalities and unfairness of the bedroom tax and demand that it is abolished now.

Work with tenant associations, community support and welfare groups to:

- mobilise public opinion against evictions and the bedroom tax and promote legal challenges brought by tenants groups and welfare campaigners.
- assist tenants in possession proceedings by helping to provide full disclosure on the causes of rent arrears to demonstrate the pernicious affect of the bedroom tax penalties.
- campaign for extra funding for the support work being provided by housing workers to help tenants adapt to the bedroom tax and other welfare reform changes.

Work with councils and social housing providers to ensure that:

- tenants are prevented from losing their homes through sensitive debt management and rent arrears procedures and best practice examples of local authorities who have a "no-eviction" policy are promoted and workable alternatives to solve the real problem of housing shortages are promoted.
- there is active engagement with tenants offering advice and support on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) fuel poverty and health assistance quickly and fairly distributed to all in need.
- housing allocations prioritise tenants hit by the bedroom tax, suspensions are removed for those placed in arrears as a result of the bedroom tax and those who wish to reallocate to downsize are assisted.
- applications by tenants to have properties reclassified are carried out where it can be evidenced that a bedroom is needed to meet disability or medical needs, or where the layout or size is not suitable for a bedroom or where an adaption makes the room unusable.

Work with employers and housing providers to:

- ask employers to undertake a risk assessment on verbal and physical abuse for all employees dealing with the public face to face or on the phone.
- ask employers to ensure that any performance targets on arrears recovery reflect the difficult time tenants are having with the bedroom tax.

Working in the housing sector? Join UNISON and our housing campaign for the abolition of the bedroom tax now

Three simple ways to join UNISON today:

Join online at joinunison.org

Call us on 0800 171 2193

Ask your UNISON rep for an application form