

Wiltshire Council

Council

10 July 2012

Questions From Councillors

From Cllr Jon Hubbard, Melksham South Division

To

**Cllr John Thomson, Deputy Leader And Cabinet Member For Adult Care,
Communities And Housing**

Question 3

The introduction of benefit changes by the Government is going to lead to a number of challenges for landlords. In particular are the changes which will stop Housing Benefit being paid directly to Landlords and instead directly to tenants.

This could lead to an increase in rental arrears and, as a consequence, an increase in tenants being evicted.

Could the cabinet member please:

- i) Inform me of what steps the council is taking to support their own tenants manage these changes when they are implemented;
- ii) Give me some understanding of the planning that is taking place to mitigate the impact of the changes on Wiltshire residents who find themselves in financial difficulty and how the potentially significant increase in families/people presenting themselves as homeless will be managed.

Response i)

Because some customers will be experiencing a number of changes to their benefits the council are preparing as a whole a communications campaign, extending into 2013, which aims to provide accessible information and deliver it in a number of ways. This includes the council's website, mail shots and interacting with the local radio and media to inform and share information. This work is being carried out in conjunction with the voluntary sector and specifically the CAB and also with the housing providers so that best practice / knowledge is shared.

For our own tenants we will also be providing information to them through our tenant magazine and_ are currently recruiting a dedicated financial inclusion officer. We already provide significant funding to the CAB, who also support our tenants. Training on the impact of welfare reform has begun for all our front line staff and we be able to target our resources to contact each individual tenant who will be impacted by these changes

We will also make best use of our ability to transfer applicants who would be in financial hardship to move into smaller accommodation that better suits their needs, which in turn will free up larger accommodation for other households.

Response ii)

The impact of these changes are varied and that is why a cross-departmental group has been put together working with other partners as above on a county wide action plan and communication strategy. Wiltshire Assembly members who also looked at this issue in detail at the June meeting and in addition we have done and will continue to provide presentations and briefings for members.

For people who may be in still then be in danger of homelessness we will continue to focus on prevention measures and have extra funding from government for rough sleepers and single homeless; extra funding to assist households at risk of losing their home; A mortgage rescue scheme and ongoing housing advice and support.