

Minutes of the
Cross Party Group on Housing
Thursday 20th February 2014 at 1pm

Present:

Patrick Harvie MSP (Vice-Convenor)
Gordon MacDonald MSP
Sarah Healey, Margaret McDougall's Office
Leanne Blunsden, Tenants Information Service (TIS)
Lynda Johnstone, Tenants Information Service (TIS)
Tristan Compton, National Landlord Association
Lesley Baird, Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS)
Alastair Cameron, Scottish Churches Housing Action
James Battye, Shelter Scotland

In attendance:

Alastair Hackland, RICS
Caroline Day, Musselburgh Job Centre
Susan Napier, FRICS
Greg McCracken, Age Scotland
Anna Riva, Link Housing Association
Rebecca Marek, Scottish Youth Parliament
Kelsie Pettit, Homeless Action Scotland

1. Welcome and Apologies

Patrick Harvie MSP (Chair) opened the meeting of the Cross Party Group on Housing and intimated the following apologies:

Margaret McDougall, MSP
Keith Anderson, Port of Leith Housing Association
John Blackwood, Scottish Association of Landlords
David Bookbinder, CIH

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

It was noted that Patrick Harvie's surname was misspelt in the minutes of the previous meeting.

Action from previous meeting – TIS to arrange a joint meeting with SPREEE. Lynda Johnstone, TIS, updated that SPREEE already have their meeting dates set until Autumn 2014. The Cross Party Group on Housing members were invited to join the SPREEE meeting which took place on the 23rd January 2014. It was agreed that the Cross Party Group on Housing will have a joint meeting with SPREEE in Autumn 2014.

Action – TIS to arrange a joint meeting with SPREEE for Autumn 2014

3. Main Item: Universal Credit – discussion led by Caroline Day, Musselburgh Job Centre

Overview

- Replacing 6 benefits: Income based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income based ESA, Income Support, Child Tax Credits, Working Tax Credits and Housing Benefit.
- New personal contract – Claimant Commitment – with individual circumstances taken into consideration. For those fully fit and ready to start work you would be expected to look for work on a full time basis. For those unable to work – support will continue. Outlines not just what work you are looking for, but how and when you will look for work – My Work Plan.
- Benefit may be affected if you do not follow through on what has been agreed on your Claimant Commitment/Work Plan.
- Claimant's can apply for and access their benefit entirely on-line – payment being made on a monthly basis, and the claimant receives a monthly statement. Back up telephone and face to face services will also be available for those who cannot access the Internet.
- At the moment only single people, within the specific postcode areas and who no dependent children, aged 18+ are eligible. There are other eligibility criteria that have to be met in order for the claim to UC to proceed. See website Partnership Toolkit website for full details.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253978/uc-making-your-claim.pdf

- Once the claim is made, claimants must still attend their local Jobcentre Plus office, and will be informed in advance what paperwork has to be produced in order for the claim to be put in place and also some form of identification to verify your details, e.g. passport, driving license.
- Once in work, benefits will be withdrawn as earnings increase, thus removing risks of taking up part time work.
- Universal Credit will be paid direct to the claimant monthly, encouraging personal responsibility for budgeting etc – reflect the world of work
- Currently 9 offices nationwide are taking Universal Credit claims and a further 3 are scheduled to join them this spring. Gradually all offices will offer this service with an anticipated end date of 2017.
- Other benefits may also be available to those claiming Universal Credit – based on individual's circumstances, eg – Funeral costs; health costs; cold weather payments to name only a few.
- More information can be accessed through the <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit> weblink.

Responses from Caroline Day to questions and concerns from the floor

- The long term impact of employer's behaviour is not being specifically examined, however adverse behaviour will be fed up the line through Issue Logs.
- Caroline Day highlighted that studies show there is a misperception of zero-hour contracts, and these contracts will be examined carefully through partnership working . The zero-hour contract system should encourage a gradual reduction of claimants' benefits as they work longer hours, rather than vast fluctuations in benefits received.

- The introduction of Universal Credit across Scotland will be a stage by stage programme. There is currently no timetable for introduction, however it is expected that the majority of claimants will be online by 2016.
- In response to a question on the rules on sanctions, Caroline Day informed the floor that with the claimant having increased input and buy-in to the work that they are applying for, sanctions should decrease. In the long run, it is expected that sanctions will level out.
- With regards to budgeting and money management, there will be contingencies whereby rent arrears can only increase by so much. There will be money management sessions as part of the courses that are on offer.
- There will be outreach projects which have access to broadband at Local Authority IT premises to aid rural and remote communities who do not have easy access to a job centre. As Universal Credit is digital by default, these projects will also address digital inclusion by supporting those who are unable to use a computer.
- There is currently little information on issues arising around contact centres, however communication channels will be an important aspect of the planning process.
- Discussions are currently taking place with the Post Office and banking institutions to offer suitable types of bank accounts.
- The aim is to get Credit Unions on board with Universal Credit. The issue of non-transactional credit unions in rural communities is currently being addressed. A solution may come from the Post Office or banking institutions.

Patrick Harvie MSP thanked Caroline Day for her presentation at the meeting of the Cross Party Group on Housing.

4. Cross Party Group Business

Patrick Harvie MSP asked the floor for items of discussion for upcoming meetings. Suggestions include:

- Housing supply and procurement
- Scottish Housing Regulator presenting on the housing options approach
- Scottish Government bonds
- Housing Bill Stage 2
- Letting agents code of practice

Members are in favour of addressing two subject topics per meeting where possible.

Action – TIS to arrange speakers for upcoming meetings

Tristan Compton requested the minutes from the Cross Party Group on Housing AGM.

Action – TIS to source the AGM minutes from the previous Secretary of the Cross Party Group

5. AOCB

Greg McCracken, Age Scotland advertised the Age Scotland Annual Conference.

6. Date of next meeting and close

Thursday 24th April 2014, 1pm-2pm – Room TG20/21

Future Meetings:

Thursday 19th June 2014, 1pm-2pm – Room Q1.03 or TG.20/21

The meeting was closed at 1:40pm. Patrick Harvie MSP thanked all for attending.