



Report to Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee 25 July 2013

Report of: Director of Policy, Performance and Communications

Subject: The Impact of Welfare Reform on Sheffield's Residents

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Summary:

Sheffield City Council has expressed concern about the Government's introduction of the 'bedroom tax'. This report:

- i. examines the impact of both the 'bedroom tax' and of other changes to the welfare system on the people of Sheffield; and
 - ii. explains what the Council is doing to support Sheffield residents, in response to the welfare reform agenda.
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Type of item:

Reviewing of existing policy	
Informing the development of new policy	
Statutory consultation	
Performance / budget monitoring report	
Cabinet request for scrutiny	
Full Council request for scrutiny	X
Community Assembly request for scrutiny	
Call-in of Cabinet decision	
Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee	
Other	

The Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee:

- i. is asked to note the contents of the report and the progress made on both understanding the impact of welfare reform on Sheffield's residents and supporting residents in response to the welfare reform agenda;
 - ii. is asked to provide views or comments on the Council's approach on responding to the welfare reform agenda; and
 - iii. is asked to consider whether the committee would wish to receive further update reports on this issue.
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Background Papers:

Sheffield Hallam University, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Hitting the poorest places hardest: The local and regional impact of welfare reform

Category of Report: OPEN

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Sheffield City Council has expressed concern about the Government's introduction of the 'bedroom tax', which is negatively affecting a significant number of both Council tenants and tenants of other Registered Housing Providers in the city.
- 1.2 At the meeting of Full Council on 5 June 2013, Members of the Council agreed to closely monitor the impact of the 'bedroom tax' and they asked the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee to examine the impact of the 'bedroom tax' on Sheffield people, as well as the impact of all other welfare changes.
- 1.3 In addition to examining the impact of changes to the welfare system on the people of Sheffield, this report explains what the Council is doing to support Sheffield residents, in response to the welfare reform agenda.
- 1.4 Because of the complexity of the welfare reform changes and the varied and shifting timescales for the implementation of the changes, it is not straightforward to estimate or assess the full impact of the changes. However, this report sets out the Council's current understanding, based on the information that is becoming available from the changes that have already been implemented, and our understanding of the likely impacts of future changes.
- 1.5 The Council has set up a Welfare Reform Implementation Group to oversee our response to the welfare reform agenda and to co-ordinate the activity which is happening across the organisation, which has over the past year included:
 - the launch of the Local Assistance Scheme (to replace the Social Fund);
 - the implementation of the Council Tax Support Scheme and Council Tax Hardship Scheme;
 - communications activity to raise awareness of benefit changes amongst residents and frontline staff - this has included the development of a single, recognisable brand which has been used in information booklets, website, billboards, media work, local events and targeted letters;
 - support for residents affected by benefit changes; and
 - work to understand the impacts of benefit changes on residents and on council services.

Over the next year the work of the Welfare Reform Implementation Group will also include working with Government to support residents through the introduction of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments.

2.0 Background

2.1 At the present time the UK is seeing the biggest change to the benefits system in 60 years. The Government has identified three key problems with the current system:

- Work incentives are poor
- The system is too complex
- Welfare costs too much

2.2 Government's stated view is that reform of the system is required to help people to move into and progress in work, while supporting the most vulnerable and reducing overall spend on the system.

2.3 Older people have been largely insulated from the welfare reforms, as this has been an explicit policy decision of the present Government. Therefore people of working age and their families are being disproportionately impacted by benefit cuts.

2.4 The changes to benefits are considerable in terms of complexity, impact and volume. The key changes and their timescales for implementation are listed below. More detailed information on each of these changes is available in Sections 3.0 and 4.0 below.

Welfare Reform	Brief Summary of Change	Timescale for Implementation
<i>Housing Benefit – Local Housing Allowance</i>	Changes to the rules governing assistance with the cost of housing for low-income households in the private rented sector.	Implemented in 2011
<i>Housing Benefit – Under-occupation ('Bedroom Tax')</i>	New rules governing the size of properties for which payments are made to working age claimants in the social rented sector (widely known as the 'bedroom tax').	Implemented on 1 st April 2013
<i>Non-dependant Deductions</i>	Increases in the deductions from Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and other income-based benefits to reflect the contribution that non-dependant household members are expected to make towards the household's housing costs.	The first change was implemented in April 2012, and a further change was implemented in April 2013.
<i>Household Benefit Cap</i>	New ceiling on total payments per household, applying to the sum of a wide range of benefits for working age claimants.	Due to be implemented from August 2013
<i>Council Tax Benefit</i>	Reductions in entitlement of working age claimants arising from reduction in total payments to local authorities.	Implemented on 1 st April 2013

<i>Disability Living Allowance (DLA)</i>	Replacement of DLA by Personal Independence Payments (PIP), including more stringent and frequent medical tests, as the basis for financial support to help offset the additional costs faced by individuals with disabilities.	All new claims from June 2013 are to be for PIP, not DLA. Migration of existing DLA claimants to PIP from October 2013; all DLA claimants to have migrated to PIP by the end of 2018.
<i>Incapacity Benefits</i>	Replacement of Incapacity Benefit and related benefits by Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), with more stringent medical tests, greater conditionality and time-limiting of non-means tested entitlement for all but the most severely ill or disabled.	Migration of existing claimants of Incapacity Benefit began in 2011 and migration is due to be completed by April 2014.
<i>Child Benefit</i>	Three-year freeze, and withdrawal of benefit from households including a higher earner.	Benefit frozen for three years from April 2011. Withdrawal of benefit from high earners implemented January 2013.
<i>Tax Credits</i>	Reductions in payment rates and eligibility for Child Tax Credit and Working Families Tax Credit, paid to lower and middle income households.	Implementation from April 2013.
<i>1 Per Cent Up-rating</i>	Reduction in annual up-rating of value of most working-age benefits.	Implementation from April 2013.
<i>Universal Credit</i>	<p>This change will affect all people of working age who are currently receiving any of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income Support • Income-based JSA • income-related ESA • Housing benefit • Tax Credits <p>These benefits will be replaced by one single monthly payment which will be paid in arrears, to a single person in each household.</p>	Migration to Universal Credit is due to take place over four years between October 2013 and March 2017.

3.0 Impact of Under-occupancy ('bedroom tax') on Sheffield residents

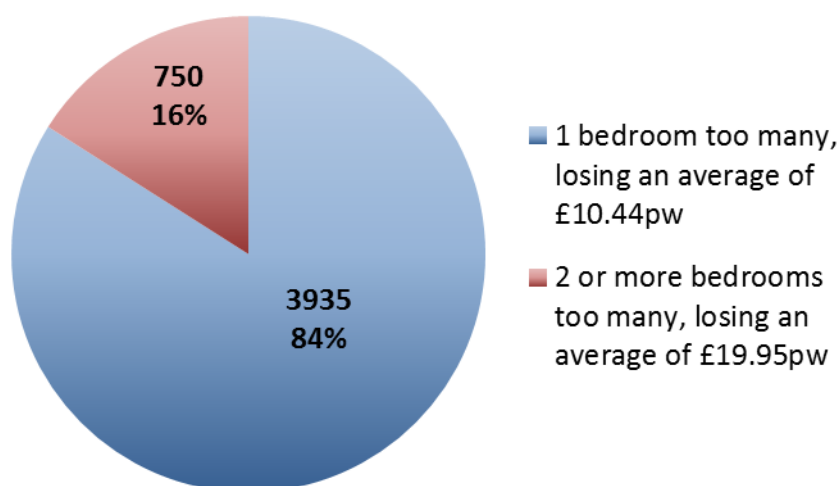
3.1 In April 2013 the Government reduced the amount of Housing Benefit (HB) for working age Council or Housing Association tenants living in homes that are classed as too big for them. Tenants with one bedroom too many have lost 14% or more of their HB. Tenants with two or more bedrooms too many have lost 25% or more of their HB.

3.2 The number of people affected by Under-occupancy is continually fluctuating, due to tenants' ongoing changing circumstances. Therefore, while the information provided below offers some insight into the impact of Under-occupancy on Sheffield residents, it should be noted that this is a moving picture.

3.3 At the end of June 2013 there were 4,685 council tenants affected by Under-occupancy¹. Of those:

- approximately 84% were assessed as having 1 bedroom too many, losing an average of £10.44pw; and
- approximately 16% were assessed as having 2 or more bedrooms too many, losing an average of £19.95pw.

Impact of Under-occupancy on Council tenants



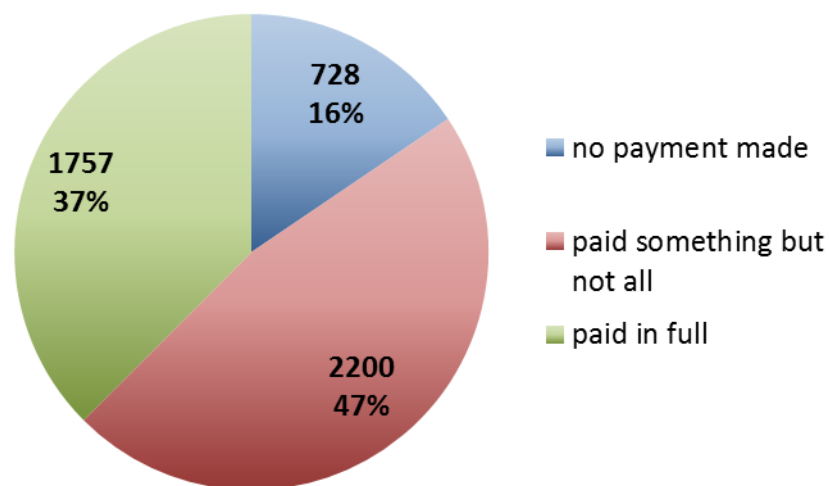
3.4 For the 4,685 tenants affected by Under-occupancy, at the end of June:

- 728 (16%) had not made any payment towards the Under-occupancy cut in their benefit;
- 1,757 (37%) had paid in full; and
- 2,200 (47%) had paid something but not all.

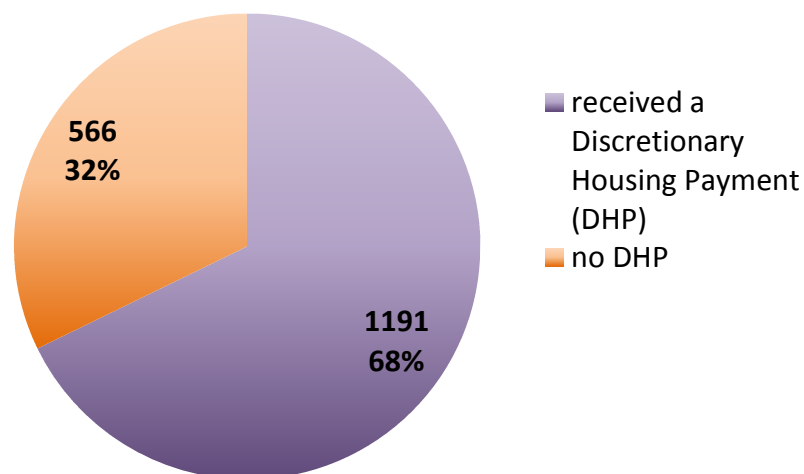
¹ **Note:** See paragraph 5.5 below regarding the discrepancy in figures shown in the *Impacts on Households* table below.

3.5 These figures are an improvement on the figures for April and May, but they still reflect significant issues with tenants' ability or willingness to pay. Further work on individual cases is ongoing. It is important to note that of those 1,757 tenants who have paid the full amount of the Under-occupancy cut in their benefit, the vast majority - 1,191- have received a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). DHPs are administered by the Council and are payments which are used to support customers with housing costs. See Section 6.0 below for more information on DHPs.

Payment towards Under-occupancy cut in benefit by Council tenants



Receipt of DHP by Council tenants paying the full amount of the Under-occupancy cut in their benefit



- 3.6 Gross arrears for all council tenants increased by £265k in June 2013 (current arrears increased by £140k in June). This is an improvement on the position at the end of May; these figures are now in line with the increase in arrears at the same time last year. However, it is important to note that, as illustrated in para 3.4 above, at the moment many tenants are using DHPs to help them meet the costs of their housing. Clearly this position is unsustainable and there is therefore a high risk that arrears will increase in future months.
- 3.7 Since April 2013, 199 tenants have been awarded a rehousing priority to move to a smaller property. Of these:
- 178 tenants have stated this is due to the impact of welfare reforms;
 - 49 tenants have had agreement to move, despite them having rent arrears that would normally have stopped them from being rehoused;
 - 7 tenants have been re-housed already.
- 3.8 For tenants who have expressed a desire to move, where appropriate the Council will support tenants during the interim period by:
- i. Applying for a discretionary housing payment (DHP) to cover the Under-occupancy element.
 - ii. Awarding hardship payments. The Council has a small hardship fund of £50k to support tenants affected by welfare reforms and will make payments from this to help them to cover any arrears due to reforms whilst the Council works with them to remedy the situation, which may include moving house or helping people find employment.
 - iii. Being more flexible and allowing a tenant who is affected by Under-occupancy to move with existing arrears that may have been accrued prior to 1 April 2013 and the onset of the changes.
- 3.9 It is important to note that there are approximately 2,000 further households affected by Under-occupancy living in Housing Association properties. To-date the Council has not collated data regarding the impact that Under-occupancy is having on those households.

4.0 Impact of other welfare reform changes on Sheffield residents

- 4.1 There are many other changes to the benefits system which are contributing to a net decrease in household income for those claiming support. The most significant of these are detailed below.

4.2 Council Tax Benefit

From April 2013 the Government replaced Council Tax Benefit with a local scheme of Council Tax Support (CTS) run by individual local authorities. The fund available to local authorities to provide the new scheme included a significant cut, when compared to the money available to provide Council Tax Benefit. As pensioners have been protected from the changes to Council Tax Benefit, working age taxpayers have been forced to share the burden of the reduction in funds

available. The changes to Council Tax Benefit also mean that the Second Adult Rebate for working age claimants has now ended.

4.2.1 The Council has about 33,000 working age taxpayers who receive Council Tax Support. All of these customers now have to pay at least 23% of their Council Tax. This number includes about 24,000 who previously paid nothing towards their Council Tax and now have to pay 23%.

4.3 **Household Benefit Cap**

From August 2013 a cap will begin to be introduced on the total amount of benefit a single person or family can receive. This benefit change affects the working age population only. The cap is £500 a week for a family, and £350 a week for a single person. The Benefit Cap does not apply where the claimant, their partner or any children receive some specific benefits, including disability benefits.

4.3.1 The number of residents in Sheffield who will be affected by the Benefit Cap will be small, particularly when compared with those affected by other major benefit changes. However those households who will be affected will experience a substantial impact on their lives.

4.3.2 The Benefit Cap is expected to affect around 120 Council tenants with the reduction ranging between £1.24 and £412 per week. The overall number of households who will be affected by the Benefit Cap in Sheffield is estimated to be 320.

4.4 **Disability Living Allowance (DLA)**

From June 2013 all new claims from 16-64 year olds, which would previously have been for DLA, will be for a new benefit called Personal Independence Payment (PIP). From October 2013 onwards, people aged between 16 and 64 who currently receive DLA will start to be reassessed for PIP. By the end of 2018 all DLA claimants will have migrated to PIP.

4.4.1 The replacement of DLA by PIP includes more stringent and frequent medical tests. The budget nationally has been cut by £1,075m per year (a 20% budget cut) and the focus of PIP payments is to be on the most disabled, e.g. it will be harder to qualify for PIP than it would have been to qualify for DLA.

4.4.2 It is estimated that 4,700 households in Sheffield will be affected by these changes.

4.5 **Universal Credit**

This change will affect all people of working age who are currently receiving any of the following: Income Support, Income-based JSA, Income-related ESA, Housing Benefit and Tax Credits. These benefits will be replaced by one single monthly payment which will be paid in arrears, to a single person in each household.

4.5.1 Moving to Universal Credit is not designed to reduce the overall amount of benefit paid (and is therefore not represented in the *Impact on*

Households table below) but it is likely to cause difficulties for some residents who will need to make arrangements to pay their housing costs where it had previously been paid directly.

4.5.2 In addition, there will be a move towards online claiming which will have significant implications for many households who do not have access to the internet. Migration to Universal Credit is due to take place over four years between October 2013 and March 2017.

4.6 There are further changes to the welfare system, which although less-significant than those listed above, will still have an impact on many people in Sheffield. These changes are summarised in the table below.

Non-Dependant Deductions	This reduces the deductions from several income-based benefits to reflect the contribution that non-dependant household members are expected to make towards the household's housing costs. These changes affect tenants with non-dependent adults (e.g. parents, grown up children) living in the house. The first change was implemented in April 2012, and a further change was implemented in April 2013.
Housing Benefit: Local Housing Allowance (LHA)	There have been changes to the rules governing assistance with the cost of housing for low-income households in the private rented sector. The new rules apply to rent levels, 'excess' payments, property size, age limits for sole occupancy, and indexation for inflation. From April 2011 the rules changed to introduce absolute caps for LHA. From October 2011 LHA rates were set at the 30th percentile of rents in each Broad Rental Market Area rather than the median.
Incapacity Benefit	Incapacity Benefit and related benefits are being replaced by Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), with more stringent medical tests, greater conditionality and time-limiting of non-means tested entitlement for all but the most severely ill or disabled. Migration of existing claimants of Incapacity Benefit began in 2011 and migration is due to be completed by April 2014. The budget is being cut by up to £2,500m per year (30%) by 2014.
Child Benefit (CB)	Child Benefit has been frozen for three years from April 2011. There has also been an affluence test for CB which involves tapered withdrawal of CB (via income tax) from households where there is an earner over £50,000; CB stops completely where income reaches £60,000.
Tax Credits	There have been reductions in payment rates and eligibility for Child Tax Credits and Working Families Tax Credit, paid to lower and middle income families.
1% Up-rating	There has been a reduction in annual up-rating of value of most working-age benefits, which means a real-terms reduction in the amount that they are worth over time.

5.0 Net effect of welfare reform changes in Sheffield

5.1 The table below provides a breakdown of the financial loss to households resulting from changes to the welfare system. It is important to note that the figures show the estimated total impact when the present welfare reforms have **come into full effect**.

5.2 The data shown here has been produced by Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research. This illustrates that when the present welfare reforms have come into full effect, there will be **£173m less** per year in the local Sheffield economy.

5.3 This equates to a financial loss of **£471 per year** for every working age adult in the city. However it is important to note that clearly the burden of welfare reform changes will not be shared by every working age adult in the city – as many will not be affected at all – and therefore many of those people who are affected are likely to suffer a financial loss of more than £471 per year.

5.4 It is important to note that of those suffering a financial loss there are a substantial number of people who are in work and claiming income related benefits, and a greater number who claim tax credits. Therefore the true picture is that the changes to benefits are not only affecting people who are out of work, but also those who are already in employment, challenging the all too common perception that the welfare reform agenda is targeting those who are idle.

Impact on Households Table

	No. of households affected	Estimated loss £m per year	Estimated average loss per household £ per year	Estimated average loss per household £ per month
Housing Benefit: Under-occupancy	11,200	7.6	679	57
Council Tax Benefit	34,200	7	205	17
Household benefit cap	320	1.5	4,688	391
Disability Living Allowance	4,700	14	2,979	248
Non-dependant deductions	3,000	3	1,000	83
Housing Benefit: Local Housing Allowance	8,500	8	941	78
Incapacity benefits	12,000	42	3,500	292
Child Benefit	63,300	22	348	29
Tax Credits	43,700	35	801	67
1 per cent uprating		32		
Total Impact		173		

5.5 **Note:** As this table is directly reproduced from a piece of research undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), not all of the data tallies accurately with the local data that we have. For example, the

number of households affected by Under-occupancy in Sheffield was estimated by SHU to be 11,200 however we now know that the number of households in fact affected by this is approximately 6,500 - 7,000. This discrepancy is partly due to the fact that the picture is ever changing, as people move in and out of tenancies, but is more likely to be attributable to the fact that until benefits changes come into effect it is not always possible to know precisely how many people will be affected by the changes and therefore more accurate data is usually available after changes have been implemented.

- 5.6 Although the information above provides a useful starting point, it does not show us the *cumulative impact* of welfare reform on individual households within the city. For example we know that many households will be affected by not only the Under-occupancy rules but will also be affected by the requirement to contribute to Council Tax for the first time. In the future these households may be affected by other changes, for example Universal Credit and/or the introduction of PIP, if there are people with disabilities in the household.
- 5.7 A piece of work is currently being carried out by the Performance and Research Team to enable the Council to try to better understand the cumulative impact of welfare reform impacts on households within Sheffield.

6.0 Council support for Sheffield residents who are impacted by welfare reform: Hardship schemes

- 6.1 The Council administers or runs three principal schemes to help people who are suffering from financial hardship. These are the Council Tax Hardship Scheme, Discretionary Housing Payments and the Local Assistance Scheme.

6.2 Council Tax Hardship Scheme

The Council has set up a £500K hardship fund for those who are struggling to pay their Council Tax.

- 6.2.1 As at 5 July 2013, 2,144 Council Tax Hardship Scheme awards had been made, totalling around £130,679.

6.3 Discretionary Housing Payments

The Council is responsible for administering Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), which are used to support customers with housing costs. Many of these customers are those affected by a reduction in Housing Benefit as a result of the Under-occupancy rules.

- 6.3.1 As at 5 July 2013, 1,731 awards for DHP had been made, totalling around £384,481.

- 6.3.2 The main reasons for DHP awards are 'to help with short-term rental costs until the claimant is able to secure and move to alternative accommodation' (12% of awards) and 'to help with short term rental costs for any other reason' (81% of awards). The latter category will mainly include those customers whose housing benefit has decreased

because they have a spare room and who are unable to pay but do not have an imminent option of moving to different accommodation.

6.4 Local Assistance Scheme

Some discretionary elements of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Social Fund were abolished from April 2013, with the DWP providing funding for the Council to establish local assistance for financially disadvantaged people.

6.4.1 The Council has received funding for 2013/14 and 2014/15 as follows:

	Fund	Administration	Total
2013/14	£2,071,098	£437,638	£2,508,736
2014/15	£2,071,098	£401,143	£2,472,241

6.4.2 The discretionary elements of the Social Fund which were abolished were used by the DWP to provide two types of award - Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans.

6.4.3 In view of the challenging timeline to deliver the changes, Sheffield City Council's Local Assistance Scheme implementation has 2 phases. The first phase of the scheme, which started in April 2013, resembles the DWP scheme which it replaces. This is an interim solution which reflects the commitment across the Council and from stakeholders to continue to offer individual financial assistance to customers experiencing poverty. In the second phase, the Council will develop a longer term approach and delivery model which align further to Council strategy for Tackling Poverty and Increasing Social Justice.

6.4.4 Applicants to the Local Assistance Scheme have to meet certain eligibility criteria, including being resident in Sheffield and in receipt of particular benefits.

6.4.5 Community Care Grants exist to help vulnerable people to remain or set up home in the community, to ease exceptional pressure on families, or to prevent someone going in to care. These grants are usually in the form of an award to purchase white goods and furniture.

6.4.6 Crisis loans are awarded to customers who are experiencing extreme financial difficulty due to an emergency. The scheme offers loans to meet short term expenditure needs. These short term loans are to be repaid through the benefits, and are administered by the Sheffield Credit Union.

6.4.7 Between 1 April 2013 and 30 June 2013, the Council received:

- 1,468 applications for assistance, and 3,307 phone calls to its dedicated team
- 762 applications for loans, of which 402 (52%) were awarded (the average loan award was £81)
- 577 applications for grants, of which 422 (73%) were awarded (the average grant award was £519)

7.0 Council support for Sheffield residents who are impacted by welfare reform: Other activity

7.1 A great deal of activity is taking place across the Council to try to support Sheffield residents who are experiencing difficulties as a result of the changes to welfare benefits. This work is summarised below.

7.2 Support for Council Tenants

In response to the welfare reform changes, the Council Housing Service has undertaken the following activity:

- Carrying out 8,008 attempted visits to tenants affected by Under-occupancy or the Benefits Cap, and successfully gaining contact with 2,611 tenants.
- Helping tenants to make applications for Discretionary Housing Payments.
- Identifying a small number of homes where it is appropriate to re-designate the size of the property, due to adaptations that have been carried out.
- Participating in a trial which has supported five tenants (two of which were on the brink of eviction action) to open Sheffield Credit Union budgeting accounts.

7.2.1 The budgeting accounts referred to above - known as 'jam-jar accounts' - help customers to budget effectively and pay their creditors on time. The Council Housing Service is using this trial to assess whether it would be possible to support more tenants to open these accounts in the future.

7.2.2 Future Council Housing Service work will include:

- Working with the Access to Housing Team to progress cases where tenants have requested a move to downsize to ensure they are able to move and not build up rent arrears.
- Preparing tenants for the transition to Universal Credit.
- From July, wherever possible holding surgeries in council housing area offices where tenants can attend for a prearranged appointment or just drop in to obtain advice and support on benefits changes. This will ensure that the Council works more effectively and sees more tenants, however Housing Officers will still carry out home visits to vulnerable tenants and those who are unable to attend surgeries.

7.3 Support for Children, Young People & Families

It is anticipated that the welfare reform agenda will have an impact on many families who come into contact with children & young people's social care services. Social work teams have been kept up to speed with changes to the benefits system, have been given information about budget planning and have been given guidance on the Local Assistance Scheme so that they can refer families in need onto appropriate help and support.

7.4 Support for people at risk of homelessness

It is also anticipated that welfare reform will have an impact on homelessness in Sheffield. In response the Council is finalising a Prevention Action Plan, including improving triaging of customers and home visits to support customers as early as possible. The Council is also developing a new Homelessness Strategy to focus on activity to prevent homelessness occurring, and where homelessness does arise, to assist customers to achieve settled and sustainable housing in a timely way.

7.5 Support for older people

Most of the benefits changes which have come into effect to date will not affect people of pensionable age, and are therefore unlikely to have a significant impact on older people at the present time. However, future changes to disability benefits will affect people approaching pensionable age so this may have an impact in the future. The Council is reflecting on the possible impacts of welfare reform on this group of people and is assessing how to support these customers.

7.6 Support for people with learning disabilities and mental health problems

Residents with learning disabilities and mental health issues are likely to be affected both by wider welfare reform changes and the anticipated future reduction of specific disability benefits. The Council is starting to monitor the impact of welfare reform on this particular group and is assessing how to support these residents.

7.7 Supporting the transition to Universal Credit

Work is currently underway on the Council's response to the forthcoming implementation of Universal Credit, recognising that:

- Universal Credit will require all customers to apply for their benefits online, many of whom are likely to have limited access to the internet;
- Some residents will require intensive support when Universal Credit is implemented and this support will need to be provided through face-to-face contact.

7.8 Work with partner organisations

The Council is working closely with advice centres in Sheffield to ensure that work to support those experiencing difficulty as a result of welfare reform benefit from a joined-up approach. The Council will continue with this approach. Further work will also be required in the future to better understand how other partner organisations in the city will be impacted

by the welfare reform agenda and how the Council can best work with these partners to help mitigate the impacts for Sheffield residents.

8.0 Conclusions

- 8.1 As this report has demonstrated, some significant steps have been taken to date both to understand the impact that welfare reform is having on Sheffield residents and to put measures in place to help Sheffield residents to deal with these changes. However more work is clearly needed and the Council is committed to continued work to inform its understanding of the issues and to support Sheffield residents to cope with the impact of welfare reform.

9.0 Recommendation

- 9.1 The Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee is:
- i. is asked to note the contents of the report and the progress made on both understanding the impact of welfare reform on Sheffield's residents and supporting residents in response to the welfare reform agenda;
 - ii. is asked to provide views or comments on the Council's approach on responding to the welfare reform agenda; and
 - iii. is asked to consider whether the committee would wish to receive further update reports on this issue.