

DEPUTATION ONE – HANDS OFF OUR HOMES

THE LORD MAYOR: Good afternoon and welcome to today's Council meeting. Please make your speech to Council, which should not be longer than five minutes, and please begin by introducing the people in your Deputation.

MR I DALTON: My name is Iain Dalton, this is Carole O'Keefe, Jon Owen, Armardeep Singh Burde and Simon Conneff.

The Bedroom Tax, (or under occupation rule) was brought in three months ago today and affects more than 9,000 people across Leeds who are social housing tenants receiving housing benefit. People who are considered to have one or more spare rooms have had their housing benefit cut by between 14% and 25%. This cut is affecting thousands of families with children and is disproportionately affecting people with disabilities.

We are a group of Leeds citizens, some of us employed, some unemployed, some social housing tenants, others home owners or private renters. Some of us are directly affected by these cuts but all of us have family, friends, neighbours who are affected and we have come together as Hands off our Homes to support those who have been hit, to defend homes and to campaign against this unjust tax.

Since we formed just over a year ago we have held meetings and formed local groups across the city in those areas most heavily impacted - from Middleton to Gipton, Woodhouse and Armley. Our meetings have been attended by hundreds of people, we have spoken to hundreds more on estates in Hunslet and Seacroft and in high rise blocks in Cottingley, Little London and Lincoln Green. In April more than a thousand people marched through the centre of Leeds asking that you, our Councillors take a stand against this tax which, on top of Council Tax benefit cuts, rising food and fuel costs is forcing thousands in this city deeper into debt and poverty.

We have talked to parents in Harehills and in Armley who have started to miss meals to feed their children and in winter will sacrifice heat to keep a roof over their family's head; to a 56-year old man in Hunslet, who is confused and frightened by the cuts to his Council Tax and Housing Benefit and now refuses to leave his house; a young man living alone in a high rise in Lincoln Green who told us he was considering ending his life; a single father in Woodhouse whose children have now left home and has to find £20 out of his weekly allowance of £71 and is now cutting down on food, who is hungry and ashamed and isolated; a grandmother in Beeston whose home of 23 years is the only place that her grandkids can see their dad; a grandmother in Morley who looks after her disabled grandson to give her daughter some respite; a grandmother in Seacroft whose grandchildren stay over so their mum can work nights.

None of these are spare rooms. They are part of a home and all the different functions that a home plays in the life of families. Every case is an injustice.

We are deeply concerned at the repeated stories from tenants of Housing Officers putting pressure on people to cut back on essentials in order to pay the rent, suggesting that one single father, a full time carer, uses his son's disability benefit to pay the shortfall; refusing to give a woman with learning disabilities in Lincoln Green a Discretionary Housing Payment form; telling a woman with severe mental health problems that she will be out on the street if she does not pay up, that rent comes before food.

These are not isolated cases we have been hearing the same thing across the city. In Armley, in Little London and in Woodhouse these issues have been taken to local Councillors who have said they will investigate. So far we have heard nothing.

Tenants have been told they can downsize or increase their hours but we know that there are simply not enough jobs or houses to go round. In the last three years the Council has let only 1,500 single bed properties - 4,500 of those affected by the bedroom tax are looking for a one bed property. The biggest increase in people claiming housing benefit is from those in low paid work and in the last four years, Leeds has lost more jobs than any other major UK city outside of London.

We are here to ask the Council to commit strongly to opposing this horrendous measure and to take responsibility for the way in which it is being implemented. We know that Leeds City Council did not introduce this tax but your hands are not tied.

It is unacceptable that vulnerable, desperate, depressed people should feel harassed in their own homes by the behaviour of Housing Officers. It is unacceptable that this should continue and we are calling for the Council to investigate the training and practices of Housing Officers.

We welcome the fact that the Council has already re-classified around 800 homes but this is just a drop in the ocean and needs to be expanded further. We are asking that you follow the example of other Councils across the UK and pledge not to evict people who are in arrears as a result of the Bedroom Tax. We are asking that you admit the false economy of spending money chasing people for money they do not have and pledge to write off arrears resulting from the Bedroom Tax.

Finally, it is plain to see that social housing tenants are being blamed for chronic housing crisis that they did not cause. The only solution to this will be to build more social housing. Thanks very much. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Harper.

COUNCILLOR G HARPER: Lord Mayor, I move that the Deputation be sent to the Executive Board for consideration.

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Latty.

COUNCILLOR G LATTY: I second that, Lord Mayor.

THE LORD MAYOR: *(A vote was taken)* That is CARRIED.

Thank you for attending and for what you have said. You will be kept informed of the consideration which your comments will receive. Good afternoon. Thank you. *(Applause)*