

DEPUTATION FOUR – LEEDS YOUTH FIGHT FOR JOBS

THE LORD MAYOR: Good afternoon and welcome to today's Council meeting. Please now 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 Lord Mayor and fellow Councillors, we have come here from Youth Fight for Jobs. My name is Iain Dalton, I am the local organiser of the campaign. This is Tanni Spelsham-Ray, who is a student at Leeds Trinity University College, and this is Joe Muller, who is a catering worker.

There is a crisis in housing, a crisis in the social housing sector with 27,000 in Leeds on waiting lists for Council and social housing; a crisis in the private rental sector with average rents across the country consuming around half of people's incomes; a crisis in the home owning sector, where only 1,300 homes were built in Leeds last year and to buy even the lowest priced one you would have to earn over £40,000 a year.

This is a crisis that is hitting many young people acutely. We believe that everybody should be able to live in a decent quality, affordable home but for young people it is becoming harder and harder to be able to do this. A record almost three million people between the ages of 20 and 34 still live with their parents, an increase of half a million in the last 15 years. When you do move out it is usually into an HMO – a house of multiple occupancy. For some people this is a choice, they like living with other people but for most it is a necessity to be able to afford to do so, particularly anyone under 35 on Housing Benefit.

In the area I live in young people, especially students, get crammed into houses, sometimes up to three or four in what would have in the past been a two-bedroom house because although the rent charged is cheaper for each individual, the total rent taken from a house is greater. This also limits the properties available to couples and families. In effect, the HMO landlords benefit at the expense of all tenants.

Low pay is a factor in this. Many young people are unable to find full-time work and have to do with part-time jobs. The TUC estimates that in the UK there are 3.3 million people in work who would like to get more hours up to full-time work. This is up from 2.3 million people in 2008.

Those in work under 21 years of age have a lower minimum wage than the rest of the population, which scandalously will be frozen this year, yet there is no discount on rent or bills to go with the discount employers get on staff aged under 21. This has an impact on Housing Benefit, with 93% of new Housing Benefit claims being from households where at least one person is in work.

Housing Benefit is also important for the unemployed who, with the Governments' cuts to Housing Benefits, will be expected to make up the shortfall and with the new proposal to scrap Housing Benefit for under 25s, then some young people face the harrowing prospect of losing their home as well as their job if they are made redundant. Whilst we welcome the Council's stance in taking up the bedroom tax issue, this is only one of the damaging effects of the Government's changes to Housing Benefit.

HMOs in particular can often be poorly maintained, sometimes because tenants live there for less than a year. I have heard friends tell me countless times about leaky pipes not being fixed, broken ovens and washing machines and other issues, but also it is difficult sometimes to know who is responsible for maintaining this. The buck gets passed between landlords and letting agencies.

There has been a proliferation of letting agencies with various extra charges levied by them on tenants such as credit check charges and the Guardian a few weeks ago even reported about someone who was charged £440 for cleaning that was not even carried out.

We think the Council has the choice over these matters. It can act or not. Whilst we are aware you do not have power over every aspect of housing you could, for example, increase the resources to the Environmental Health teams to carry out regular inspections of tenanted properties. You could refuse to carry out the cuts to Housing Benefit and campaign for the additional funding to make up the shortfall from the Government.

There have been Councils in the past that have opposed Government policies on housing to defend the interests of ordinary people in their areas such as Clay Cross in the 1970s and Liverpool in the 1920s. Where you do not have direct powers at the present you should put pressure on to the Government to act on these matters, or give you the powers.

We think a mass social housing building programme is necessary with good quality housing, as well as a cap on rents at an affordable level. Empty housing could be compulsorily purchased and brought back into use. The money is there for this. The Housing Benefit cuts at just over £2b are less than half what Vodafone were let off tax last year, £7b out of a total of £120b each year evaded by wealthy and large corporations.

The Government could use its ownership of some banks such as HBOS and RBS to run them in the interests of ordinary people and, for example, to make cheap, affordable mortgages available to first time buyers.

We believe that a mass campaign will be needed to build up the political pressure for this money to be used to start resolving the housing crisis, so we ask again. The choice is yours – will you act on this or not? Thank you very much. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor James Lewis.

COUNCILLOR J LEWIS: Thank you. I move that the matter be referred to the Executive Board for consideration.

COUNCILLOR G LATTY: Seconded, Lord Mayor.

THE LORD MAYOR: All those in favour? (*A vote was taken*) 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. (*Applause*)