

Prepared for: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

# Impacts of Social Sector Size Criteria (Bedroom Tax)

Final Report

6 September 2019

Sarah Carter and Ruth Flood

# Acknowledgement

RF Associates would like to thank the community and voluntary sector stakeholders, housing association staff, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) staff and the tenants we interviewed for taking the time to participate in this research. We would also like to thank the Research Unit and the Welfare Reform Project Team for their guidance with the project.

*The content of this report does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Housing Executive. Responsibility for the information and views expressed lies entirely with the authors.*

# Contents

<b>CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>2. METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>3. LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>4. RESEARCH FINDINGS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH TENANTS, STAFF AND STAKEHOLDERS</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>5. PERSONAS</b> .....	<b>77</b>
<b>6. POLICY AND OPERATIONAL CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>82</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>85</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>86</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: DISCUSSION GUIDES</b> .....	<b>88</b>
<b>APPENDIX 3: LETTER PROVIDING NOTIFICATION OF LOSS OF WELFARE SUPPLEMENTARY PAYMENT</b> .....	<b>100</b>
<b>APPENDIX 4: FORM: PERMANENT LOSS OF WELFARE SUPPLEMENTARY PAYMENT</b> .....	<b>102</b>
<b>APPENDIX 5: COPY OF FORM USED BY HOUSING ASSOCIATION</b> .....	<b>103</b>

# Executive Summary

## Background to the Research

The Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC), more frequently referred to as the bedroom tax, came into effect in Northern Ireland as part of the broader programme of welfare reform on 20 February 2017. It applies to Housing Executive and housing association tenants considered to be ‘under-occupying’ their homes. Where a household is considered to be ‘under-occupying’, the eligible rent used to calculate the Housing Benefit/housing costs element of Universal Credit will reduce by 14% if under-occupying by one bedroom, or 25% if the household is under-occupying by two bedrooms or more.

At the time of writing, most households that are impacted by the bedroom tax, and whose circumstances have not changed, are receiving Welfare Supplementary Payment as part of a mitigation scheme that is scheduled to end on 31 March 2020. However, where an under-occupying household chooses to transfer or exchange (without Management Transfer status) to another property in the social rented sector where they continue to under-occupy to the same level or perhaps greater, they will no longer receive a Welfare Supplementary Payment (WSP).

In December 2018, the Housing Executive commissioned RF Associates to conduct research assessing the impact on tenants who had been affected by Social Sector Size Criteria and had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment. At the date at which this project commenced, it was estimated that around 100 Housing Executive households had lost bedroom tax mitigation through changes in circumstances. This qualitative research focused on the experiences of these households and how they had dealt with the impact of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment for under-occupation.

## Methodology

The research comprised a literature review, qualitative research with stakeholders, including Northern Ireland Housing Executive staff, and qualitative research with a sample of tenants affected by the bedroom tax.

A total of 15 depth interviews were carried out with tenants who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payments, recruited from tenant lists supplied by the Housing Executive. In addition, four telephone depth interviews were completed with Housing Executive frontline staff who had dealt with tenants who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment. All the interviews were carried out in February/March 2019.

## Literature Review Evidence

The reduction in Housing Benefit for working-age social tenants whose properties have more bedrooms than they need, based on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) size criteria, was introduced in England, Wales and Scotland on 1 April 2013. The Government intended the reform to cut the cost of Housing Benefit expenditure and to encourage tenants to downsize so as to make larger properties available for those who needed them.

Claimants in England and Wales can apply to the local authority for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) where there are special circumstances that contribute to financial difficulties. The Scottish government has vowed to abolish the 'bedroom tax' in Scotland and since 2014 has fully funded affected tenants with DHP to cover the costs of reduced payments due to over-occupying.

An evidence review carried out for the Equality and Human Rights Commission and published in 2018 collated research and data on the impacts of the various changes to the benefits system introduced as part of the wider programme of welfare reform. It indicated that:

- relatively few affected tenants had downsized in response to the bedroom tax;
- those who stayed had had to meet the financial shortfall by using savings, moving into work, increasing working hours, or letting out the spare room;
- affected claimants had mainly responded by 'paying and staying', absorbing the financial losses primarily by reducing essential and non-essential spending, applying for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), and borrowing money from friends and family;
- Housing associations reported an increase in rent arrears, including among tenants who had never previously experienced them;
- There was emerging evidence that 'paying and staying' may prove hard to sustain for some families, making them look for alternative options; and
- Some qualitative studies had identified that the bedroom tax had had negative psychological impacts such as pervasive stress and greater social isolation, leading to a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Research among housing associations in England (Hickman et al, 2018) had indicated that the impacts of SSSC had been less pronounced than initially expected. This was attributed to:

- Extensive use of Discretionary Housing Payments to mitigate the reductions in Housing Benefit;
- Commitment of resources to prepare for and manage SSSC;
- Introduction of new allocations policies;
- Tenants downsizing; and
- Changes to operational practices including increased communication with tenants, provision of digital services, placing more emphasis on tenants' responsibilities, provision of more advice and support, and adoption of a more proactive approach to income collection.

An initial scoping study published by the Housing Executive in 2018 noted that approximately 30% of Housing Executive tenants and 25% of housing association tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit were likely to be impacted by the SSSC. In its January 2019 report on Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Audit Office noted that the shortage of smaller property in Northern Ireland may result in increased deductions for under-occupancy, leading to difficulties for tenants and social landlords alike.

## **Qualitative research findings**

Interviews with Housing Executive tenants and staff and other key stakeholders provided a detailed picture of the issues and challenges facing social housing tenants and landlords in Northern Ireland, where the bedroom tax is concerned.

### ***Making the decision to move: tenants' awareness of potential impact***

1. Tenants cited a range of reasons for wanting to move to a different property, from seeking a home that was more affordable to run, to wanting to live closer to family members. A number of tenants also wanted to move to escape issues with neighbours/people in their locality. All tenants had moved to new accommodation with the same number of bedrooms.
2. Two thirds of tenants claimed that they did not know that the bedroom tax would apply to them if they moved, and seemed to be unaware that they had previously been receiving Welfare Supplementary Payments. They had found out about the loss of mitigation a while into their new tenancy, which often meant that significant arrears had built up. They usually found out about their loss of mitigation through a letter from the Housing Executive detailing their arrears.
3. One third of tenants interviewed said they did know about the bedroom tax before they moved and there was some recollection from these tenants of the letters/forms used by the Housing Executive in relation to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment.
4. Of the ten tenants who claimed they only became aware that they would have to pay the bedroom tax after they had moved, six said or strongly inferred that they would have moved anyway. This was because most had important reasons for moving in the first place, for example to be closer to family, and circumstances meant that they would just have to find a way to make up the shortfall.
5. All tenants were generally confused about the bedroom tax, and individual circumstances were difficult to unpick due to a lack of understanding by tenants of what had happened. Tenants did not understand the logic for a change in Housing Benefit payments when the size of the property they were living in had not changed and their personal circumstances had not changed. The policy felt

unfair to tenants, and none of them were aware of what the policy was trying to achieve. Some tenants were aware of the lack of smaller housing stock so could not see how it made sense.

6. Most of the tenants interviewed now understood that mitigation will end for most people in March 2020, but there were mixed views as to whether this was understood more widely in their communities.

### ***Housing Executive staff: experiences and perceptions***

7. Staff presented a general view of tenants as being focused on their own specific circumstances at that moment in time. Overall, tenants were not looking ahead and thinking about the future impact of the bedroom tax. Both Patch Managers shared examples of tenants who had made decisions not to transfer to properties they would under-occupy and tenants who were anticipating being impacted in future and had actively downsized in advance.
8. Staff also perceived that tenants' reasons for moving often appeared to have been significant enough to mean that they did not engage around the bedroom tax, i.e. they wanted to move regardless of any other factors. Also, tenants in receipt of full Housing Benefit have been used to having their housing costs paid for them in full, so the need to actively make an additional payment to the Housing Executive was a new area of responsibility and it seemed to have been a shock to the system for some.
9. Housing Executive staff explained that they always informed tenants about the bedroom tax and the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payments. However, they recognised that tenants did not always understand the implications of moving and losing Welfare Supplementary Payment. They gave a number of reasons for this. Staff perceived that:
  - Tenants were used to their housing costs being paid for them and were not used to having to take responsibility for them.
  - Tenants expected that 'someone else', e.g. the Housing Executive, would resolve any issues with housing payments on their behalf.
  - Tenants often lived in the moment and were unable to grasp the implications of needing to pay additional rent in the future.
  - Tenants included vulnerable people who might have mental health issues and could be hard to engage with; if those who were eligible for some form of additional tenancy support did not seek it out or consent to receive it, it was difficult to provide them with help.
  - Tenants thought that they would be able to manage the payments, but the reality was that when it came to the point at which they were asked to make additional payments, they felt unable or unwilling to do so.
  - Tenants did not fully engage with what they were being told by Housing Executive staff; they don't always believe them.
  - Tenants did not always read letters or communications from the Housing Executive.

- Tenants' desire to move to a specific new property trumped any caution they might have about incurring costs in the future.
10. All four frontline staff interviewed expressed the view that they understood the policy and that Patch Managers followed the correct processes of informing tenants and ensuring they were aware that the transfer would lead to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. However, the contrast between this and tenants' experiences of the process suggests that there is a mismatch between what the Housing Executive is doing and what tenants need in order to fully understand the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. Clearly the message about the bedroom tax had not been understood by some tenants.
  11. There was a sense from these discussions that communications by the Housing Executive and housing associations have been improving over time, so the mismatch may partly reflect the outcomes of different, earlier phases in the development and refinement of communications about bedroom tax. Further, we hypothesise that some Housing Executive frontline staff may be making assumptions that tenants know what the bedroom tax is and that they understand the implications of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment. We also hypothesise that Housing Executive staff assume that these tenants know how to pay the additional rent because they don't ask questions about it at the point at which staff talk to them about it. However, it is clear from our qualitative research with tenants that they do not really understand the policy, its application to them and, most importantly, the implications it will actually have for them, until they first realise that they are in arrears and owe money due to losing Welfare Supplementary Payment.
  12. It was also apparent that there are issues around the language associated with SSSC and we hypothesise that this could be contributing to confusion around the policy amongst tenants.
  13. Staff commented that there had recently been a period of considerable organisational change within the Housing Executive. Head office staff commented that communications with tenants had been an area of development and continued to be a work in progress since the policy was introduced.
  14. All frontline staff interviewed felt that it was important that tenants were better informed about how the bedroom tax would impact them. Concerns were raised in four areas around the type and timing of information provided in relation to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and the qualitative interviews with tenants have confirmed that these concerns are justified:
    - information is provided **too late in the process** (i.e. at allocation stage when the person is already very keen to move);
    - information is **not specific enough** (e.g. people do not know exactly how much they will have to pay);
    - people **have to rush to make a decision**; they do not have enough time to consider their options; and



- people are **directed to another agency** for more specific advice, if the Housing Executive advice is unclear.
15. Patch Managers were conscious of the need to alert tenants to the future impact of the bedroom tax on those who were under occupying their properties. One talked about encouraging tenants to register on HomeSwapper so they could match with people looking for larger properties. Patch Managers were also conscious of trying to actively manage tenants who were significantly under occupying and encourage them to move to a smaller property. However, they recognised that it was too early to tell what tenants would do once mitigation ends in March 2020.

### ***Coping with bedroom tax: how tenants have responded***

16. Of the 15 tenants interviewed, only two were working and therefore had income in addition to benefits. Everyone else only had income from benefits. Further to this, only one tenant mentioned having any savings; the others admitted they had no reserves, and the majority frequently borrowed money from family and friends. In relation to the Housing Executive offer of a financial capability assessment, 13 of the tenants said they weren't offered one, or at least couldn't remember being offered one. In general all the tenants seemed to have low levels of financial literacy.
17. The loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment had had a significant impact for most of the tenants involved. All were seeking to manage their budget as best they could. This meant reducing their spending in a wide range of areas in their daily lives. A major area of impact related to tenants' abilities to do / provide things for their children such as school trips etc. Tenants talked about cutting down wherever they could, reducing spending on heating, clothes, TV packages, phones, their car etc., and watching their budget in relation to food.
18. Whilst most tenants seemed to have made significant enquiries to the Housing Executive in relation to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment, they were generally apathetic about seeking assistance and advice from other organisations as they felt that there was no one else who might be able to help them.
19. Overall, tenants were seeking to manage the shortfall in rent as best they could. This tended to be through a combination of having the shortfall taken direct from their benefits, borrowing money / getting support from family and friends and managing their budget as tightly as possible.
20. Ten of the 15 tenants said that they had not been in rent arrears previously. In comparison 11 tenants said that they were now in arrears due to having to make up the shortfall in their housing costs after losing mitigation. Analysis of the arrears data provided by the Housing Executive in relation to the sample likewise shows an increase in arrears. Twenty-eight of 100 tenants had arrears

of an average of £82.60 at the point of loss of mitigation. For the most recent quarter that we were provided with data, this had risen to 67 of 100 tenants who had arrears on average of £242.81.

21. Tenants had limited plans for managing things differently in the future. They felt they just had to get on with it as best they could, but some could not see an end to their current circumstances and/or could not think about the future. Many felt very despondent. Only two tenants mentioned looking for work. Due to their health, age or caring responsibilities, the others did not consider looking for work as a viable option. Only one of the 15 tenants said they would consider renting out a room to a family member.
22. Tenants suggested that the following areas of support could be improved:
- Clear communication of policy changes in advance of them occurring i.e. there should be communications now with tenants about the loss of mitigation that will happen in April 2020.
  - Clear communication of what these changes mean for them specifically i.e. how much money they will need to find per week, and how that totals on a monthly basis.
  - Clear direction and support on what they need to do as a result and practical advice on how they make any payment.
  - Access to a helpline / face-to-face service that can provide clear advice and answers in relation to their circumstances.
  - Any existing confusion in relation to their account to be clarified.

### ***Managing the shortfall: impact on rent accounts and arrears***

23. The negative impact on rent arrears caused by the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment was corroborated by the frontline Housing Executive staff. The few tenants that staff were aware of who had lost their Welfare Supplementary Payment had struggled to meet the shortfall in their housing costs and were accruing arrears. Staff anticipated that this would be the main impact on tenants and therefore on the Housing Executive. Staff were not able to suggest what impact the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment would have on tenants beyond this inability to pay and the prospect of becoming further behind with payments.
24. Staff were fearful of the impact on their roles and the arrears that would build up if/when the bedroom tax was no longer mitigated from April 2020. They considered that Welfare Supplementary Payment mitigation against bedroom tax was essential for preventing further increases in arrears.
25. Housing Executive staff talked about an increasingly complex workload and did not see how their workload could be sustained in the longer term if mitigation ceased as planned and arrears increased dramatically across all tenants affected by the bedroom tax.

26. Team Leaders explained that confusion between the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities (DfC) regarding Universal Credit had added to their workload considerably. They felt that tenants were being misinformed and that mistakes were being made in the processes and payment systems. They identified that Housing Executive staff were now unable to see the full picture of what was happening with housing payments to Universal Credit claimants and this was causing increasing arrears.
27. Staff were all aware that within the context of so much change, the usual processes and policy around evictions were in a state of flux. Staff had to create individual arrangements regarding arrears repayments and benefit deductions for each tenant, and this all took them considerable time. Both Team Leaders wanted the Department for Communities to act before March 2020 to prevent all the difficulties described above. One Team Leader suggested that there needed to be a Discretionary Fund to support tenants unable to pay.
28. Housing association stakeholders also predicted that they will face very significant levels of arrears following the removal of mitigation in 2020. One housing association commented that they will have arrears in the region of £1 million, another said £1.5 million. Housing associations provided information on a wide range of areas of development aimed at improving knowledge of tenants and providing them with access to information, advice and support.
29. Stakeholders, both within the Housing Executive and outside it (from the advice agency and housing associations), were extremely concerned that Universal Credit would only worsen tenants' financial circumstances and their ability to pay the shortfall.
30. Frontline staff were conscious that the Housing Executive waiting lists were considerable and that it was unlikely that affected tenants would be able to downsize easily. Both Team Leaders described how some estates used to be less popular but this was less the case now. In addition, in some locations housing stock was being reduced. They wanted to know what the Housing Executive's plans and policy would be to help affected tenants to downsize.
31. In addition, staff pointed out that the Housing Executive's own allocations policy is different to the SSSC policy. Therefore, tenants are eligible for bigger properties and are allocated properties which they will then be deemed to under-occupy. As the Housing Executive does not have many one bedroom properties, single people are offered two bedroom properties under Housing Executive allocations policy and single people with access to children may also be offered three bedroom properties. Staff emphasised that these groups of tenants are likely to be significantly impacted and are likely to have limited choice – they will not be able to downsize so they will have to pay the bedroom tax. Staff also mentioned the fact that some of the two bedroom housing stock was small and the second bedroom was not suitable for one person to occupy, yet it would be classed technically as a two bedroom property. Staff also highlighted anomalies regarding allocations policy for disabled people, and that

under the bedroom tax they would not be entitled to extra space for their equipment.

32. Team Leaders emphasised that there needed to be closer alignment between the policies coming from the Department for Communities around welfare reform and Housing Executive policies.

## Policy and operational conclusions

- i. The research findings indicate that:
  - There is very little understanding amongst tenants that mitigation is in place, preventing tenants in Northern Ireland from being affected by the bedroom tax;
  - Further to this, tenants are not aware that in certain circumstances they can lose access to their mitigation payments;
  - The removal of mitigation at the end of March 2020 may well come as a surprise to tenants and is likely to set in chain a series of events whereby a significant number of tenants will go into arrears and make contact with the Housing Executive to understand what is going on. Amongst our sample the number and size of arrears have risen significantly, and this is a trend noted in all other relevant research that we reviewed;
  - The Housing Executive has had an evolving understanding and delivery of the bedroom tax policy which may have further confused some tenants affected so far;
  - The Housing Executive and housing associations are aware of and concerned about issues associated with the bedroom tax, and are beginning to make provision through extra support for tenants, planning for arrears management etc. However, it is clear that, as March 2020 looms closer, these preparations need to be *considerable* to offset the challenges that will arise if all tenants lose their Welfare Supplementary Payments as scheduled.
  
- ii. Fundamentally the Housing Executive needs to consider how its allocation and income (arrears) policies align with the SSSC to allow for clarity going forward. It needs to consider how to implement a policy that, without a greater number of small units in its housing stock, is difficult to realise. If most tenants choose to 'stay and (try/fail to) pay', then the Housing Executive and housing associations will have to find the best ways to manage significant arrears, which is likely to require more staffing and resources in itself. On the other hand, if tenants seek to downsize, then the Housing Executive must consider how best it can access and allocate any smaller properties available and how this sits with its current allocations policy. It has been recognised in the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations led by DfC that the sharing ages of children in the Housing Selection Scheme need to be aligned with those of SSSC to reduce under-occupation for new tenants.

- iii. In the context of on-going welfare reform and a shifting of the onus to individuals to manage their own circumstances, the Housing Executive needs to support tenants as best it can to grapple with a new way of doing things that is really a culture shock to them. Tenants are used to having their Housing Benefit paid for them and to being passive recipients. We think the change that this represents for tenants cannot be underestimated. In some ways tenants are being asked to move from an adult/child transactional relationship to an adult/adult relationship in which they take ownership and charge of their own rent accounts. The Housing Executive needs to be committed to supporting this change in dynamic ways for the long haul, and to developing a new way of working with tenants.
- iv. We suggest that the following actions are of paramount importance:
- The Housing Executive should significantly enhance its communications activities with some specific and targeted activities and information that highlights these issues to tenants. This may need to take the form of a national advertising campaign to provide the level of cut through required to reach tenants and dispel the misinformation that has been in place for some time. **Tenants need to know that they will have to pay more for their housing.**
  - A communications campaign should seek to find simpler ways to talk about the bedroom tax, helping to evolve a better, clearer, common language which can be shared by tenants and Housing Executive frontline staff e.g. “You now need to pay your bedroom tax; you’ve lost the payments that were making up the shortfall”. Fundamentally it needs to move away from ambivalent language such as “you may be affected”.
  - Given the pressure that the Housing Executive staff are under, it would seem that further additional staffing should be put in place to provide advice and support to tenants to help them to plan for and manage their future, perhaps through a dedicated support telephone line that can take and answer specific queries.
  - The Housing Executive should find ways to support tenants to manage financially and develop basic financial literacy skills.
  - All frontline Housing Executive staff need to be fully trained and aware of how to deal with tenants on this issue in the best way and they, too, must move away from “adult-to-child”-style approaches.
- v. When communicating with tenants the Housing Executive needs to:
- Communicate as clearly as possible in tenants’ own language, move away from traditional letter-based communications and seek to find the best ways to educate tenants on the issue of the bedroom tax. Housing associations are increasingly using communications based around behavioural



economics approaches to help change behaviour around arrears. This may be an area for further investigation.

- Communicate exact amounts to people rather than an abstract percentage. More work could be done to test and evolve these communications, for example considering whether it is best to communicate a weekly, fortnightly or monthly sum and indeed whether it is useful to provide some sense of what that spend is equivalent to or the difference it might make to what can be bought from one week to the next.
- vi. Based on this research, tenants do not *want* to be in arrears. However, given income levels it is very hard for a tenant to get out of arrears if they fall significantly behind. Therefore, everything must to be done in both communications and practical terms to help people as early as possible. A wider communications campaign would lay the ground for people to realise that this could happen to them. Proactive tenant communications and account management is in our view the only way to help reduce the levels of arrears post-2020 and we understand there is some evidence from work already undertaken by the Housing Executive to support this conclusion. The Housing Executive needs to look in some detail at the journeys customers go on in accessing their services, to identify the most effective points in the process at which to provide focused information.
- vii. Below we have provided some ideas of elements that could be included at appropriate points within the customer journey to help with proactive account management. Ideas and approaches could be trialled with small tenant panels before wider roll-out (please note this list is not exhaustive and each idea would need development to find the best way to approach it):
- Communications campaign in relation to the loss of mitigation;
  - Access to a specific waiting list for those wishing to downsize;
  - Access to advice organisations that will help consider the best ways to manage money, provide support to access food banks etc.;
  - Arrangements to pay/agreements with Department for Communities in relation to payments put in place at sign-up meeting for new property;
  - Information at sign-up re where tenants can go if they need help and advice;
  - Rent account check when a tenant transfers to a new property;
  - Regular account check-ins and support (fortnightly perhaps?);
  - Tenant review meetings triggered after first missed rent payment (taking account of the 5 week delay waiting period);
  - Regular reminders about the need to pay rent issued via text, with examples of people in similar circumstances who have had to pay and how they manage to do it; and
  - Named front line staff to provide help and advice to a tenant

# 1. Introduction

The Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC; more commonly referred to as the bedroom tax) came into effect in Northern Ireland as part of the broader programme of welfare reform on 20 February 2017. It applies to Housing Executive and housing association tenants considered to be ‘under-occupying’ their homes. Where a household is considered to be ‘under-occupying’, the eligible rent used to calculate the Housing Benefit/housing costs element of Universal Credit will reduce by 14% if under-occupying by one bedroom, or 25% if the household is under-occupying by two bedrooms or more.

Most households that are impacted by the bedroom tax, and whose circumstances have not changed, are currently receiving Welfare Supplementary Payment as part of a mitigation scheme that is scheduled to end on 31 March 2020. However, where an under-occupying household has chosen to transfer or exchange (without Management Transfer status) to another property in the social rented sector where they continue to under-occupy to the same level or perhaps greater, they no longer receive a Welfare Supplementary Payment. At the date at which this project commenced, it was estimated that around 100 Housing Executive households had lost bedroom tax mitigation through changes in circumstances.

RF Associates was commissioned in December 2018 to conduct research assessing the impact on tenants who had been affected by Social Sector Size Criteria and who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment (WSP). This qualitative research focused on the experiences of these households and how they had dealt with the impact of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment for under-occupation.

The research objectives were:

- To assess the impact on tenants of losing Welfare Supplementary Payments;
- To assess if tenants are able to pay the shortfall in rent;
- To gain an understanding of how tenants are meeting/not meeting any shortfall in eligible rent;
- To gain a better understanding of what longer term plans tenants have to meet the shortfall in their rent;
- To assess the quality of information provided by the Housing Executive prior to loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and reasons for moving; and
- Any support needs identified after losing Welfare Supplementary Payment.

## 2. Methodology

It was considered that the research objectives were best met by a methodology that comprised a literature review, qualitative research with stakeholders, including Northern Ireland Housing Executive staff, and qualitative research with a sample of tenants affected by the bedroom tax.

A qualitative approach was chosen to provide detailed insights into the experience of tenants affected by the bedroom tax. Whilst qualitative research is not statistically representative of the entire population of tenants affected by the bedroom tax, it was considered to be the most appropriate methodology to explore and better understand the impact, motivations and behaviour of tenants.

The project approach involved the following four stages:

- Stage One: Literature review considering the evidence base to date on the impact of the removal of the spare room subsidy (RSRS) / Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC) / 'bedroom tax' on affected claimants in England.
- Stage Two: Exploratory qualitative telephone interviews with five stakeholders:
  - Two internal Housing Executive key stakeholders from Income Collection and Housing Policy;
  - One external advice agency; and
  - Two housing associations.

The findings from Stages One and Two were used to develop detailed discussion guides (see Appendix 2) for the following qualitative fieldwork:

- Stage Three: 15 depth interviews with tenants who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payments, recruited from tenant lists supplied by the Housing Executive. Thirteen interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were conducted by telephone due to issues with cancellations and postponements.
- Of the 15 tenants interviewed:
  - Four were male and 11 were female;
  - Nine lived alone, six had children living with them (three with one child and two with two or three children);
  - Their time in their homes ranged between four months and two years. Twelve tenants had lived in their new accommodation for one to two years; and
  - They were spread across Counties Antrim, Derry/Londonderry and Down.

More detail is provided in the sample response in Appendix 1.



- Stage Four: four telephone depth interviews with Housing Executive frontline staff who had dealt with tenants who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment: two Patch Managers and two Team Leaders.

Stage One and Two took place between 3 January and 13 February 2019.

Stage Three and Four took place between 18 February and 29 March 2019.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Background

A literature review was carried out with the aim of summarising relevant research undertaken in Great Britain so as to provide a context for our research in Northern Ireland and ensure that it built on existing findings and hypotheses.

RF Associates used the contents of this literature review to inform the development of the stakeholder and tenant discussion guides and the analysis and reporting of the qualitative findings.

### 3.2 Policy origins and application

The reduction in Housing Benefit for working-age social tenants whose properties have more bedrooms than they need, based on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) size criteria, was introduced in England, Wales and Scotland on 1 April 2013. The UK government termed this the 'Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy' and it was introduced under the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The criteria are summarised in a 2015 report for the Department of Work and Pensions<sup>1</sup> as follows:

The number of bedrooms required is worked out so that no one has to share a bedroom unless they are:

- A couple;
- Both aged under 10 years old; or
- Both aged under 16 years old and of the same sex.

No more than two people should have to share any bedroom.

An additional bedroom is also allowed in certain circumstances for regular non-resident overnight carers, foster carers, and disabled children unable to share a bedroom and people who are recently bereaved. Bedrooms used by students and members of the armed forces are not counted as 'spare' if they are away and intend to return home.

Those deemed to have spare bedrooms have had their rent eligible for Housing Benefit reduced by:

- 14% for one spare bedroom; or
- 25% for two or more spare bedrooms.

---

<sup>1</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research and Ipsos Mori, 'Evaluation of Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy Final Report', December 2015  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/506407/rhrs-evaluation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/506407/rhrs-evaluation.pdf)

The Government intended the reform to cut the cost of Housing Benefit expenditure and to encourage tenants to downsize so as to make larger properties available for those who needed them.<sup>2</sup> Claimants in England and Wales can apply to the local authority for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) where there are special circumstances that contribute to financial difficulties.

Since the Act was introduced, there have been a number of legal challenges by tenants affected by the cut to their Housing Benefit. Details about these can be found in the Briefing Paper published by the House of Commons in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

The Scottish government has vowed to abolish the 'bedroom tax' in Scotland and since 2014 has fully funded affected tenants with DHP to cover the costs of reduced payments due to over-occupying<sup>4</sup>.

In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive allocated a budget of £585 million in 2015 to mitigate against the impact of welfare reform changes including SSSC. A news item by BBC News<sup>5</sup> on 17 January 2019 in relation to a report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on welfare reforms summarised the situation in Northern Ireland as follows:

*Currently, many Northern Ireland welfare claimants receive "top ups" or supplementary payments if their benefits are cut as a result of UK-wide changes to the welfare system.*

*Northern Ireland also has a shortage of one-bedroom social housing stock, meaning a large number of tenants will be hit by the bedroom tax.*

*The Northern Ireland Executive allocated a budget of £585m to mitigate the effects of welfare reform over a four-year period from 2016 to 2020.*

*However, Stormont's devolved government has not functioned for the past two years, following a breakdown in relations between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin.*

*Civil servants are now in charge of the day-to-day running of public services. The budget runs out in March 2020 and no locally-elected ministers are in post to extend mitigation measures.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, W., Keen, R., House of Commons, Briefing Paper Number 06272: Under-occupying social housing: Housing Benefit entitlement, 9 June 2017

[www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06272/SN06272.pdf](http://www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06272/SN06272.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/social-security/support-with-housing-costs/#discretionary-housing-payment>

<sup>5</sup> BBC News Online, 'Welfare reform millions set aside by Stormont not spent', 17 January 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-46892952>

The NI Audit Office report, *Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland*<sup>6</sup>, published on 18 January 2019, summarised the budgetary situation regarding SSSC and welfare reforms in its Executive Summary as follows:

*21. Welfare reforms are also likely to have a major impact on housing in Northern Ireland as many social housing tenants rely heavily on benefits. The shortage of smaller properties in Northern Ireland may result in increased deductions for under-occupancy. This may in turn lead to increasing levels of homelessness, use of payday lenders and impact on the tenant's credit worthiness. Increased levels of debt (in the form of rent arrears) could threaten the financial stability of housing associations posing a risk to both the building and maintenance of social housing in the future.*

*22. There is also a significant financial risk to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, (NIHE), the largest social landlord in Northern Ireland, especially with the full roll out of Universal Credit and non-renewal of mitigation measures. Early indications from NIHE are that its rent arrears are increasing significantly, against a trend of decreasing arrears, prior to the implementation of welfare reforms. The Department told us that it is too early to determine whether rent arrears are increasing due to welfare reforms.*

*30. Claimants in Northern Ireland have not yet faced the full impact of welfare reforms because of the mitigation measures currently in place. These payments will cease in March 2020. Currently, there are no plans for further mitigations. While the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive exacerbates the position, it is imperative that options are available for Ministers to consider when the Assembly returns.*

### **3.3 Impact of the removal of the spare room subsidy (RSRS)/SSSC/'bedroom tax' on affected claimants in England**

#### **3.3.1 Overview of evidence**

The most useful report identified by the desk research exercise was an evidence review compiled for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, entitled *The impact of welfare reform and welfare-to-work programmes: an evidence review*<sup>7</sup> (referred to hereafter as the EHRC review). Drawing on all the evidence up to March 2018 about a series of

---

<sup>6</sup> Donnelly, K.J., NI Audit Office, *Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland*, 17 January 2019  
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Welfare%20Reform%20Report%202019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Hudson-Sharp, N., Munro-Lott, N., Rolfe, H., Runge, J., National Institute of Economic and Social Research, Equality and Human Rights Commission *The impact of welfare reform and welfare-to-work programmes: an evidence review*, March 2018  
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-111-cumulative-impact-assessment-evidence-review.pdf>

welfare reforms including the SSSC, the review considers the overall impact of the bedroom tax and includes findings on specific protected groups.

It finds that a key source of evidence is the previously mentioned DWP-commissioned evaluation of removal of the spare room subsidy. This included a survey of social landlords, a longitudinal survey of affected and non-affected claimants, qualitative interviews with claimants, and case study work in local authorities.

Other key sources of evidence include a number of studies commissioned by the National Housing Federation, and conducted by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) and Ipsos MORI in 2012–14. These comprised online and telephone interviews as well as qualitative interviews with housing associations and social tenants (National Housing Federation, 2015).

The EHRC evidence review identified that relatively few reports of a sufficient quality had explored the impact of SSSC on specific protected groups of claimants in terms of age, disability, religion etc. However, one exception was a number of academic articles about the impact on children and parents. These were based on a small-scale qualitative study of children in families and schools in the Manchester area (Bragg et al., 2015; Burman et al., 2017; Winter et al., 2016). In addition, a few reports by stakeholder organisations had focused on the impact of the tax by disability and ethnicity (Papworth Trust, 2013; Finney and Harries, 2013).

### **3.3.2 Overview of number of people affected by SSSC over time**

The EHRC evidence review included analysis of 2017 DWP Housing Benefit claimant data on the numbers and proportions of people affected by SSSC. The 2017 data showed that the proportion of Housing Benefit claimants affected had turned out to be less than initially estimated by the DWP in its 2012 Equality Impact Assessment, and that the numbers had reduced in the four years since SSSC was introduced:

- DWP's Impact Assessment (IA) estimated that approximately 31% of Housing Benefit claimants in the social rented sector would be affected (around 660,000 claimants).
- This included 540,000 people with one spare bedroom (81% of affected claimants) and 120,000 with two or more bedrooms (19% of affected claimants).
- The 2017 Housing Benefit figures put the number of affected claimants at 406,922 in August 2017, down from an initial 547,000 claimants in May 2013 after the introduction of the bedroom tax.

The report also includes charts based on analysis of benefit claimant data from DWP's Stat-Xplore, detailing the current number of claimants by age, gender and family structure.

## **3.4 Impact of SSSC on affected claimants**

Key findings from the EHRC evidence review were that as at March 2018:

- Relatively few affected tenants had downsized in response to the bedroom tax;
- Those who stayed had had to meet the financial shortfall by using savings, moving into work, increasing working hours, or letting out the spare room;
- Affected claimants had mainly responded by ‘paying and staying’, absorbing the financial losses primarily by reducing essential and non-essential spending, applying for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), and borrowing money from friends and family;
- Housing associations reported an increase in rent arrears, including among tenants who had never previously experienced them;
- There was emerging evidence that ‘paying and staying’ may prove hard to sustain for some families, making them look for alternative options; and
- Some qualitative studies had identified that the bedroom tax had had negative psychological impacts such as pervasive stress and greater social isolation, leading to a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing. “These studies have also identified feelings of shame and embarrassment among respondents who had to rely on foodbanks and financial assistance from friends and family (Moffatt et al., 2015; Bragg et al., 2015).” (EHRC, 2018, p106)

The DWP Impact Assessment had acknowledged that due to supply and demand factors – including a limited availability of suitably sized (smaller) dwellings – there was traditionally very little tenant movement in the social rented sector. The assessment had also included “estimates from the Department for Communities and Local Government that there was a surplus of three-bedroom properties and a lack of one-bedroom properties in the social sector” (EHRC, 2018, p105)

The EHRC review also collated evidence from a variety of sources which indicated that social tenants tend to be unwilling to move because they place a strong value on staying in their ‘home’ and in their local area, thereby retaining ties to family, friends, carers and their local safety net. In addition, people are reluctant to downsize because they consider that the size of their property meets their needs: one analysis of data about dwelling sizes in the English Housing Survey found that three-quarters of affected households lived in ‘small’ or ‘very small’ dwellings, which could suggest that the ‘spare bedroom’ was making up for a general lack of space in the house (Morgan and Cruickshank, 2014, cited in EHRC, 2018).

A more recent research study by the Centre for Economic Performance<sup>8</sup> corroborates the findings of the EHRC evidence review on the issue of propensity to move. The Centre for Economic Performance evaluated the impacts of the bedroom tax on its target group by considering a range of outcomes and using a difference-in-difference methodology that compared the observed behaviour of “treated” families with the outcomes of a suitable control group. This research found that:

- Although the bedroom tax was not successful in encouraging residential moves, tenants who moved did downsize;
- The policy did not significantly affect households’ food consumption or savings;

<sup>8</sup> Gibbons, S., Sánchez-Vidal, M., Silva, O., Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, Discussion Paper No 1537 ‘The Bedroom Tax’, April 2018 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1537.pdf>

- Although it worsened households' levels of material deprivation, this effect was not statistically significant or sizeable; and
- It had a negative impact on individuals' overall life satisfaction – mainly stemming from reduced satisfaction with income levels.

### 3.5 Impact on different age groups

The EHRC evidence review also interrogated reports and data to identify which age groups of people were most likely to be affected by the bedroom tax. It found that:

- According to the DWP's Impact Assessment, older claimants were more likely to be affected, particularly those aged over 55 up to pension age, who were expected to be more likely to be under-occupying once their children have left home.
- DWP claimant data from August 2017 showed that the majority (64%) of the 406,922 Housing Benefit claimants affected were over 50; this proportion was higher than estimated in the Impact Assessment.
- Older claimants were also the most likely to be occupying more than one bedroom, and therefore have the largest reductions in entitlements;
- The DWP Impact Assessment anticipated that the three youngest age groups (under-25s; 25–34; and 35–44) were less likely to be affected. This was because they are more likely to have children and to have been placed in social housing more recently, making it is less likely that their size requirements would have changed.

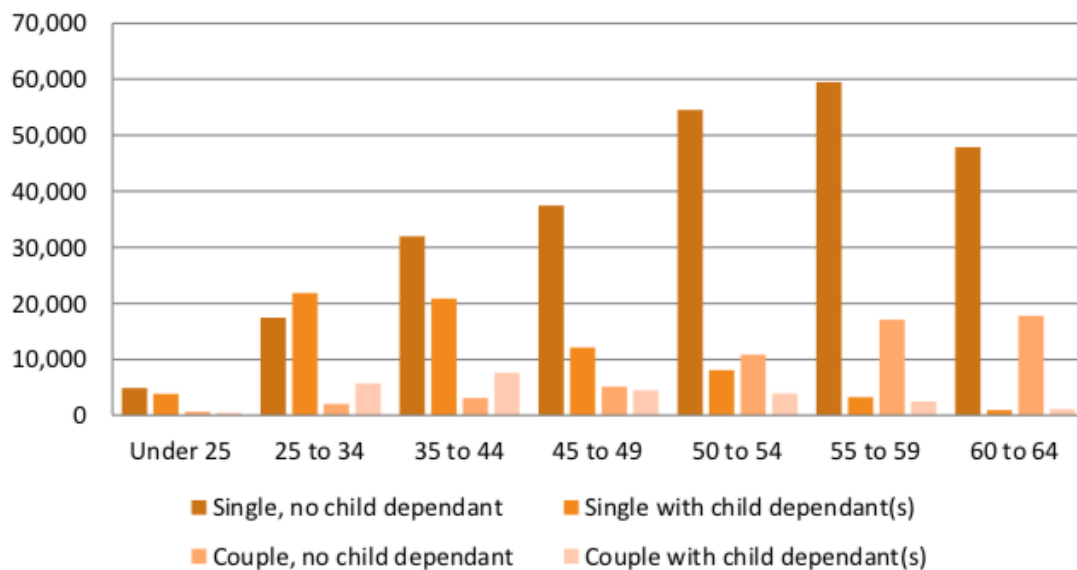
Referring to an evaluation of the bedroom tax carried out for DWP by Clarke *et al* in 2015, the EHRC review notes that:

“The DWP-commissioned evaluation found an increase in the average age during the period of the research. It attributed this in part to the rise in the upper age limit for being affected by the bedroom tax (in line with the increases in women's qualifying pension age). It also suggested that altered allocation rules had reduced the proportion of new lets to under-occupying tenants, thereby lowering the number of younger claimants.” (EHRC (2018), p107)

The following chart (labelled Figure 9.2) from the evidence review illustrates the family types affected by SSSC, according to DWP 2017 data.



**Figure 9.2 Family type of Housing Benefit claimants subject to the bedroom tax, by age group**



Source: DWP Stat-Xplore (August 2017).

[Chart appears in EHRC, 2018]

The DWP-commissioned evaluation had incorporated a longitudinal survey, the second wave of which had shown that younger claimants were more likely no longer to be affected by the bedroom tax. This was mainly because:

- Younger claimants were more likely to have looked for work, whereas older people were concerned about not having worked for an extended time, and lacked the experience and skills they perceived necessary to find employment.
- Older tenants reported that they were less likely to look into downsizing: “this was often due to psychological and social reasons for staying, such as an emotional attachment to their home, neighbourhoods and communities, including a desire to stay close to friends and family. In addition, there was limited availability of suitable nearby properties that accommodated their support needs, such as healthcare providers” (EHRC (2018), p108).

### 3.6 Impact on families with dependent children

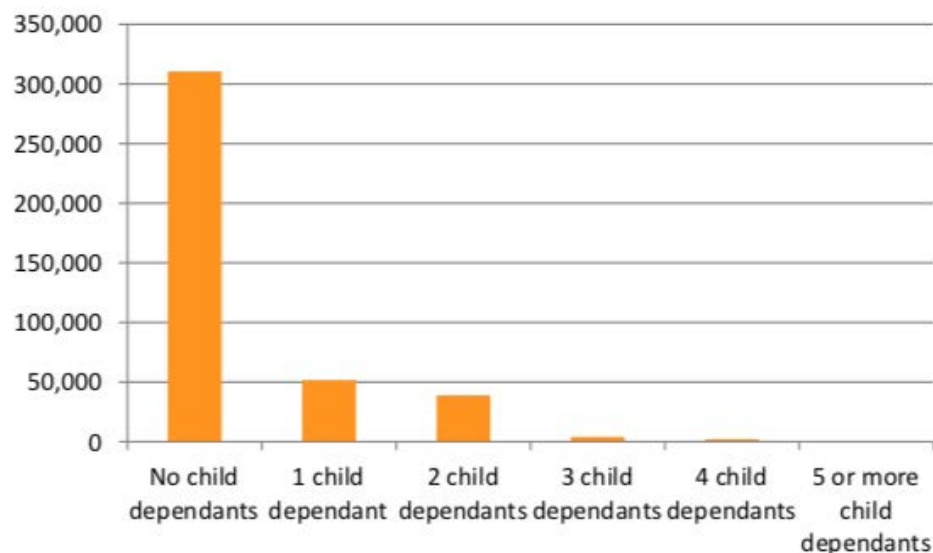
Again, drawing on the DWP Equality Impact Assessment (published in 2012), the EHRC evidence review notes that:

- Claimants with dependent children were expected to be much less likely to be affected by bedroom tax than those without. “As an example, the EIA estimated that as a proportion of working-age social rented Housing Benefit claimants, only 21% of lone parents and 20% of couple parents would be affected. In contrast, 68% of couples without children and 38% of single people would be affected.” (EHRC (2018), p108)



This assessment was supported by more recent data; the following chart (labelled Figure 9.3) from the EHRC evidence review illustrates the number of households affected by SSSC in terms of number of dependent children, according to 2017 DWP data. It shows that around 75% of affected households had *no* dependent children.

**Figure 9.3 Households affected by the bedroom tax, by number of dependent children**



Source: DWP Stat-Xplore (August 2017).

[Chart appears in EHRC, 2018]

The evidence review also found that:

- Analysis carried out in 2011 indicated that the majority of affected families with dependent children had only one spare bedroom, meaning they would face the lower (14%) reduction in Housing Benefit entitlement.
- The DWP-commissioned longitudinal evaluation (Clarke et al, 2015) found that families with children were more likely no longer to be affected by the bedroom tax by the second wave of research. This was “possibly due to the greater availability of larger houses for downsizing or because changes in household composition and circumstances [were] more likely in families with children; that is, there [were] new births or older children require[d] their own bedroom” (EHRC, 2018, p109).

However, the EHRC review noted that families with children face specific barriers in attempting to avoid or mitigate the bedroom tax. Clarke et al (2015) found that families who were affected were reluctant to move to another area due to the location of the child’s school, while previous research undertaken by the same team (Clarke et al, 2014) had shown that families were also reluctant to take in lodgers due to concerns about child protection issues.

It also found that:

“There may be negative knock-on effects on children arising from parents having to reduce spending on essentials and non-essentials, including family day trips, school uniforms, extracurricular activities and additional tuition. Some (small-scale) qualitative studies have focused on the impact on an older child of having to share a bedroom with a younger, possibly crying or bedwetting, younger sibling. This potentially leads to a disruption to sleep or to homework/revision; results in a reduced opportunity to invite friends over; and more generally prevents the older sibling from having a free space to function independently and form their identity (Bragg et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2016). Where there is a substantial gap in the ages of their children, parents are particularly likely to report that they do not feel it is appropriate for their children to share a room (Clarke et al., 2015).” (EHRC, 2018, p110)

The review also found that evidence suggests the SSSC potentially impacts households with families by:

- Limiting parents’ flexibility around their living arrangements;
- Resulting in lack of space for some young adults or university students to come home and visit;
- Failing to accommodate part-time child custody arrangements, as it mandates that a child is allocated one bedroom at a specific address;
- Distancing some children from separated or divorced fathers, as it removes the possibility of some having a spare bedroom to use when the child visits;
- Reducing the flexibility to accommodate visiting family members and grandchildren; and
- Allowing little flexibility for changing family circumstances.

Studies by both Moffatt *et al* (2015) and Clarke *et al* (2014; 2015) had found cases where parents chose to stay and pay for a limited period because they knew that their housing composition and bedroom tax eligibility would soon change, either because their oldest child would qualify for a new room or because a new baby was due to be born (EHRC, 2018).

### **3.7 Impact on people with disabilities**

Current DWP claimant data does not provide breakdowns regarding disability. However, the EHRC evidence review highlighted a number of research reports which identified that claimants with disabilities are negatively impacted by SSSC because:

- On average they are older and this is associated with a higher likelihood of having spare bedrooms after children have left home;
- Couples and children may not be able to share bedrooms comfortably due to the disability; and
- Spare bedrooms may be used for storing disability-related equipment.

The DWP has amended its policy since the initial legislation was introduced so that foster carers and families with children, whose disability or medical condition means that they cannot share a bedroom with another child, are entitled to an extra room. In addition, following a legal challenge and Supreme Court decision in November 2016:

*“further amendments were introduced in April 2017 to exempt certain cases involving disabled adults, as well as cases where a disabled child or non-dependent adult reasonably requires overnight care from a non-resident carer (Wilson, 2017a). However, there is currently no general provision to exempt adults with illness or disability similar to the exemption from the benefit cap.” (EHRC, 2018, p111)*

The EHRC evidence review found that disabled claimants also faced a number of specific barriers related to their disability when responding to SSSC:

- They were less likely to have looked for a job, and when doing so were less successful in getting a job, often facing the same long-term barriers that had previously kept them out of work;
- They faced difficulties and long waiting times to downsize due to a mismatch between the demand for and supply of suitable and smaller adapted homes; and
- They faced practical difficulties in moving house.

The impact of these barriers appeared to be borne out by the longitudinal claimant survey conducted as part of the DWP 2015 evaluation, which showed that households with a disabled person were more likely than those without a disabled person to remain affected by bedroom tax in the second wave of the study (Clarke et al, 2015), and by a separate study which found that claimants with a disability were more likely to report having reduced spending on essentials, such as heating, energy and food<sup>9</sup>.

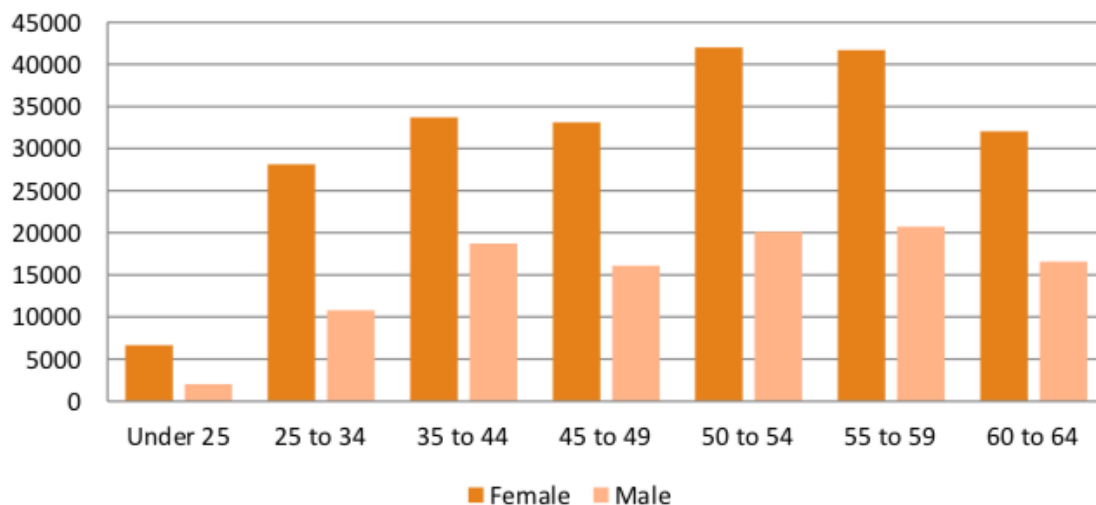
### **3.8 Impact on women**

DWP claimant data shows that women, particularly single mothers, are disproportionately impacted by SSSC relative to women in the overall population (EHRC, 2018). This disparity is largely driven by the disproportionate number of single female Housing Benefit claimants. The chart labelled Figure 9.4 shows the numbers of single Housing Benefit claimants by gender and age group, according to DWP 2017 claimant data.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ipsos MORI (2014a) *One year on: the impact of welfare reforms on housing association tenants*. Report for National Housing Federation. Available at: [http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/doc.housing.org.uk/News/National\\_Housing\\_Federation\\_Tenant\\_Survey\\_Report\\_-\\_embargoed\\_28\\_May\\_2014.pdf](http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/doc.housing.org.uk/News/National_Housing_Federation_Tenant_Survey_Report_-_embargoed_28_May_2014.pdf)

**Figure 9.4 Sex of single Housing Benefit claimants subject to the bedroom tax, by age group<sup>12</sup>**



Source: DWP Stat-Xplore (August 2017).

[Chart appears in EHRC, 2018]

### 3.9 Impact on people in terms of ethnicity, religion or belief

The EHRC evidence review found that there were conflicting findings on the extent to which ethnic minority claimants were likely to be affected by SSSC in comparison to white claimants. The DWP’s initial impact assessment (2012) had noted that a higher proportion of working-age ethnic minority claimants than other claimants had children living at home, and that these households generally had larger average family sizes, meaning that properties were more often appropriately-sized or over-occupied. However, at the time of the review there was no conclusive data about the impact of SSSC on minority ethnic claimants.

The evidence review was unable to identify evidence that had specifically explored the impact of SSSC in regard to religion or belief.

### 3.10 Impact of SSSC on social housing landlords

The Housing Executive’s 2018 scoping report on Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland<sup>10</sup> noted in section 3.12 that:

<sup>10</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2018): *Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland: A Scoping Report* available at: [www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/2b5db9a7-6fd8-420c-9265-da85a29d70b0/welfare-reform-ni-a-scoping-report.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf](http://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/2b5db9a7-6fd8-420c-9265-da85a29d70b0/welfare-reform-ni-a-scoping-report.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf)

*“research among housing associations in England (National Housing Federation, 2015) indicated that half of all housing associations had been significantly affected by the ‘bedroom tax’. The impact had been greater in some areas of the country (e.g. Yorkshire and Humberside and the North West) than others, and associations that had a significant number of tenants affected by under-occupancy rules (measured as more than 10% of all general needs tenants) were most likely to report increased difficulty in rent collection, a rise in the level of arrears and a fall in total rental income.”*

This Housing Executive report also identified that more recent research by Hickman et al (2018)<sup>11</sup> with a number of housing associations in England indicated that the impacts of the size criteria had been less pronounced than initially expected. This was due to:

- The extensive use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to mitigate the reductions in Housing Benefit;
- High level of resources committed by housing associations to prepare for and manage SSSC;
- Introduction of new allocations policies; and
- Tenants downsizing.

However, where DHPs were not available, or where there were greater levels of under-occupancy within the landlord’s stock, there was evidence of SSSC-related rent arrears. The Housing Executive’s report anticipates that there is likely to be an increase in rent arrears for landlords in Northern Ireland when SSSC is fully implemented.

The research carried out by Hickman et al built on an evidence review of research into the impact of welfare reforms in general and included qualitative research with 17 individuals working at 10 housing associations as well as interviews with 10 stakeholders representing Government departments, professional bodies, tenant organisations, and lenders.

This report found that housing associations have changed their operational practices in response to welfare reforms (not just SSSC) and that the pace of change has been accelerated by these reforms. Associations that participated in the study had:

- Increased the level of communication with tenants;
- Placed more onus on the responsibilities of tenants;
- Increased the level of advice and support they provide to tenants;
- Digitalised their services;
- Diversified and upskilled their staff base; and

---

<sup>11</sup> Hickman P., Pattison B., Preece J., Sheffield Hallam University and University of Sheffield, Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE)  
[www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/cache-impact-welfare-reforms-housing-associations.pdf](http://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/cache-impact-welfare-reforms-housing-associations.pdf)

- Adopted a much more proactive approach to income collection, with many highlighting the importance of intervening as soon as arrears accrued ('early intervention').

They reported that these changes had resulted in housing associations:

- Providing an improved and more efficient service;
- 'Knowing' their tenants better; and
- Innovating more.

These changes had resulted in changes in the landlord/ tenant relationship.

### 3.11 Impact of SSSC in Northern Ireland

The Housing Executive's Welfare Reform Scoping Report outlined the scale of the likely impact of removal of Welfare Supplementary Payments in Northern Ireland should this occur as planned in April 2020. The main findings were that:

- Figures collated by the Housing Executive's Welfare Reform Project Team showed that approximately 30% of Housing Executive tenants and 25% of housing association tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit would be impacted by the Social Sector Size Criteria.
- The introduction of Northern Ireland-specific mitigations had temporarily eased the impacts of some elements of Welfare Reform – particularly the Social Sector Size Criteria – but also meant that the impact for social tenants and landlords is unlikely to be fully understood until mitigation ends and tenants are faced with rent shortfalls.
- Mitigations had been put in place, with the Department for Communities paying a Welfare Supplementary Payment directly to the social landlord in order to make up any shortfall between actual housing costs and awards granted. This mitigation is scheduled to run until the end of March 2020.

Since RF Associates was commissioned to conduct this research, the number of social sector tenants affected by Social Sector Size Criteria who no longer receive Welfare Supplementary Payments may have increased. A report by Irish News.com<sup>12</sup> on 1 December 2018 identified that:

*"The number of homes in Northern Ireland hit by the 'bedroom tax' has increased fivefold in the past year – despite Stormont pledges to prevent the controversial welfare cut.*

*Top-up payments to mitigate against the cut ended for 54 Housing Benefit claimants in the period between April and September, new figures show.*

*It brings the total number in the north who are no longer receiving the top-ups to 175 – five times more than the 35 affected at the same point last year."*

<sup>12</sup> Irish News 1 December 2018 <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2018/12/01/news/fivefold-surge-in-homes-hit-by-bedroom-tax-in-northern-ireland-1498377/>

The total figure quoted includes housing association tenants. However, these tenants were not included in the qualitative aspects of this research, which focused on Housing Executive tenants only.



## 4. Research findings: Thematic analysis of interviews with tenants, staff and stakeholders

### 4.1 Tenant reasons for moving

All tenants had moved to new accommodation with the same number of bedrooms as in the property they left. In the majority of cases, tenants described finding a property themselves which they then discussed with the Housing Executive. A number of tenants mentioned waiting on the Housing Executive list for some time (between two and seven years).

*“I was on the Housing Executive swap list three years and then I went onto this thing called home swapper and I seen that a girl wanted to move and I asked her if she would move to my house and could I have hers and then we done it from there so I would say about two months in total after I went on to home swapper, but with the Housing Executive they never helped.” (Tenant 5)*

Tenants provided a number of reasons for wanting to move property. Five tenants had moved to be closer to a family member, either because they themselves or the family member needed help with care or simply because they wanted to live closer to them.

*“Basically I done a swap into this house to be next door to my mummy, I’m my mum’s carer, so it was easier for me to fit her into my routine being beside her.” (Tenant 2)*

Four tenants mentioned needing or wanting to move due to issues/altercations with neighbours/people in the area.

*“Just somebody turned nasty, very nasty on me. Seen me weak and turned nasty. But I cannot understand it because they threw the rule book at me. I’d all the evidence I shouldn’t have moved at all, the rules that the Housing Executive has, she should have went not me.” (Tenant 3)*

*“I was having a lot of trouble up there with one of the neighbours was bullying the child and stuff, and then her daddy was terrorising me up there so I ended up I needed closer to family ... My child had said and all up there, ‘if you don’t move I’m going to kill myself’ because of an adult bullying her. It wasn’t even a child, it was an adult; because she had a problem with me she took it out on her then.” (Tenant 8)*

Three tenants had moved due to health issues, as they needed to be in a property with fewer stairs.

*“I moved in here two years ago. I swapped this for a two-bedroom house, the reason being is I have bad legs, bad back, I’m registered disabled, and it’s just easier to get about, because when I was in the house I was either stuck down the*



*stairs or stuck up the stairs, [you] know once my legs or my back had went, so this is why I swapped to the flat.” (Tenant 1)*

Two tenants had moved as they wanted to be in a property that was more manageable/affordable e.g. with a smaller garden.

*“Because it was a lot bigger house, I mean when you looked out my front garden I mean my garden would have reached near enough onto the road and it was like 20 feet long out the front, had a big double driveway out the back and a big side garden, I mean you put a 12 ft. trampoline in my front garden and it would have looked tiny. I mean it was really, my living room would have been the length of two of these living rooms, you know what I mean? I had to get a big corner sofa and a cuddle chair and all of this furniture plus more that I had to get rid of when I moved in here, so I mean it was a big drop in size for me. [Had you partly been wanting to move for affordability reasons then, for a wee while?] Yeah. Not just for that, the house was too big. Just more manageable and more like for cleaning and decorating and I’d lost interest in the house because it was so big.” (Tenant 14)*

Another two tenants mentioned issues in relation to a bereavement. One tenant had recently moved to a specially adapted bungalow but her husband died soon after they had moved in, so she found it hard to settle in the bungalow. Another tenant’s mother had passed away and a family member asked them to swap as they needed a larger home.

*“Yeah so I had a three-bedroom house in [X] with two gardens, so my niece lived here with four kids so we decided to swap round. Yeah, ’cause my kids didn’t want the house because of my mother you see, and she was, she needed the house with the kids, she had a wee four-year-old so we decided to...” (Tenant 4)*

Housing Executive frontline staff identified some of the same reasons for moving as those mentioned by the tenants interviewed, including:

- Direct exchange because another tenant had a property that they would prefer to live in and that tenant was happy to swap to their property
- Moving to be near family
- Elderly people moving to ground floor accommodation
- Downsizing

Frontline staff also mentioned some other reasons for moving that had not been mentioned by tenants:

- Moving away from paramilitary activity/intimidation
- Direct exchange to a smaller property that was less expensive to heat

*“The guy he’s in, like, a two-bedroom house with a big living room and two bigger bedrooms and he was looking a smaller two-bed house. So this young girl had two children; his house would be better for her. So the two of them wanted to do a direct exchange, but with the guy then, wanting to do that direct exchange meant then he was going to lose his bedroom tax.” (Patch Manager 2)*

Stakeholder views on reasons for moving also corroborated the qualitative research. They identified that tenants impacted by the loss of WSP seemed to be those who had chosen to do a direct exchange or transfer or whose management transfer status had been missed. They identified that tenants could be driven by a desire to move away from housing that they were not happy with and that this could be due to issues with children, neighbours etc.

*“People have lost WSP if they have accepted a transfer or done a transfer themselves - people who have had issues with anti-social behaviour, children with autism where accommodation was onto a main road - seemed to be people in crisis, with backs against the wall. We would also have seen a few people who should have had management transfer status and it has been missed by the housing association. When doing training we are now making it clear that it is really important for housing officers to key this stuff onto the systems - that it can't be missed or forgotten, as it is hard to get it re-instated once it has been lost...Tends to be young families (where illness, anti-social behaviour is maybe a factor)...They are being forced into making the decision.  
(Advice Agency Stakeholder)*

#### **4.2. Staff and stakeholder perceptions of tenant awareness and understanding of Welfare Supplementary Payment and the bedroom tax**

Stakeholders noted that there had been confusion around the bedroom tax since it was first introduced in Northern Ireland and commented that tenants may not be aware of the existence of Welfare Supplementary Payments. Several mentioned that reassurances provided by local politicians have led people to believe that the bedroom tax does not apply in Northern Ireland.

*“I am still surprised by how much misunderstanding and misinformation there is out there - that people don't realise that bedroom tax has come in in Northern Ireland as they think politicians have pulled us out of it. There are a lot of myths to dispel. It's almost like it is in two camps - some people stressed and anxious about it - and others who are unaware.” (Advice Agency)*

*“Also politicians in NI have added to the confusion by stating that NI is not subject to bedroom tax ... It needs to have more publicity. People are burying their heads - tenants are burying their heads.” (Housing association)*

Housing Executive frontline staff perceived that tenants were generally aware at a low level of the bedroom tax because of reports in the media, but that most had not given any consideration to it impacting them in future.

*“I think from the residents' point of view there seems to be a lot of denial about it. You know, even though they are interested in hearing about it, there seems to be a lot of denial or lack of thought about what's going to happen whenever it comes in.”  
(Team Leader 1)*

*“I think there was maybe a lot of hullabaloo across the water about it and then it was not going to come in here, then it was coming in here, then it was delayed coming in here. So I think social media maybe... I don't know... but...I feel that the majority of people if not all that I talk to never turn around and say to me 'what's the bedroom tax?'. That's my answer on that one. They definitely know. I wonder, we've probably given them letters too, we've probably lettered them about the bedroom tax as well.”*  
*(Patch Manager 1)*

Across all the stakeholder groups (Housing Executive staff, external advice agency and housing associations) there was concern that tenants would have limited understanding in relation to the potential loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. The table below summarises key comments from each grouping in relation to their views on the levels of understanding.

*Table 1 – Key comments on SSSC and the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment*

<b>Housing Executive</b>	<b>Housing Association</b>	<b>External advice agency</b>
Mixed views internally as to whether people are informed when they make the decision and lose WSP	Noted local political parties providing incorrect contextual information	
Procedures had been put in place to improve communication	View that some people are aware, others much less aware	
Some recent internal research suggests where a good discussion has been had with the tenant, that tenants are more able to manage their arrears	People only becoming aware at the point at which they want to move. Some decide still to move.	Complicated policy area – took a long time to come in and then due to mitigation some people do not realise that SSSC applies in NI

*“There are those who have chosen not to move when this has been explained to them. Majority don't know about it. There is a lack of understanding that people are in receipt of this as a payment. Tenants tend to only engage if there is a problem. Can be very difficult. Some just bury their head in the sand. Could be texting and visiting and they just ignore it. People are used to not having responsibility for payment.”* (Housing association)

### 4.3 Tenant awareness and understanding of the bedroom tax and their experience of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment

It is difficult to disentangle tenants' knowledge and awareness of the bedroom tax prior to them moving home. Approximately half of the tenants said that they knew about the bedroom tax in some capacity before moving. They had often learnt about the tax from the television/local newspapers. One tenant knew about it through their involvement with a community association. Some knew that it would be introduced in 2020 but not about the potential for loss of mitigation payments before this time. Therefore it was frequently a surprise that the bedroom tax would be applied to them as a result of their decision to move property.

*"I didn't think the bedroom tax was actually going to come out until 2020 or something was it? Because I remember seeing it on the news, I knew it was over in England." (Tenant 4)*

*"I actually knew quite a bit about it because my last job I used to work for a community association and I used to run a wee welfare reform group where I had people coming in and it was all to do with these changes when welfare reform came out, so I actually knew quite a lot about it. [And then when did you first know it was going to affect your personal circumstances?] After I moved in here. And realised that I was being charged for the extra room." (Tenant 6)*

*"I'd heard that it was a possibility that it was going to come in in Northern Ireland. I heard it on the news, but I thought it was ridiculous because they aren't supplying enough one bedroom apartments or houses for anyone in Northern Ireland. Maybe they are elsewhere but there just are not enough of them." (Tenant 9)*

Tenants' understanding of why they had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment was variable. Tenants were generally very confused about it. Of the 15 tenants, only four clearly explained that they knew what was going to happen.

*"I knew I was going to end up having to pay it. They did tell me that whenever they sent the letter to say that they had given the go ahead, but it was better for me to go ahead with the move." (Tenant 7)*

Amongst the remaining 11 tenants, four had a clear understanding that they had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment as they continued to under-occupy, and that the mitigation did not now apply because they had moved. The other seven tenants still had difficulty understanding the rationale for the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and could not understand why they had lost the mitigation when they had simply moved to another property of the same size.

*"Yeah I would probably like to know why – because both properties were basically the same with three bedrooms – why I can't get the supplementary payment. I'm not a hundred per cent why that happened. [NIHE staff member] sort of says to me 'it's because you've not downsized and you've stayed the same' but I'm sort of*

*thinking, if I've stayed the same well then why is it not the same, you know?"*  
(Tenant 2)

*"[Do you understand why you're having to pay?] No. Nothing has changed in my circumstances. Well, bar having him [respondent's baby son] now, but before he was born, the house was exact same: three bedrooms are three bedrooms, front and back garden, everything; oil heating, oil heating. Nothing changed apart from different areas." (Tenant 10)*

Another tenant who understood the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment felt they should not be paying the bedroom tax currently as their new property had needed significant repair, meaning that they still had not been able to move in.

Many tenants expressed the view that the tax was unfair.

*"When I moved here they kind of says to me you know...I put a case forward to them and they knew I was ill whenever I got this house and I says 'family helps me, comes and stays'. But it's the government; what can you do about it?"*  
(Tenant 3)

As part of the interviews with tenants we showed them an example of a letter providing notification of loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and a *Permanent Loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment* form to see if they recalled seeing them (see Appendices 3 and 4). Three tenants had a general recollection of a letter, and two recalled that the form looked familiar; however, the majority of tenants did not recall any particular forms in relation to the bedroom tax. One of those tenants who did recall signing forms admitted that they may have signed this form but in a hurried fashion.

*"I remember going down to the Housing Executive office and filling in forms like signing for the house but I don't remember that one." (Tenant 6)*

*"They didn't show me any of that because when I went down that day to get the house, to sign for the house, I just got a bit of...they just gave me the letter to say you're accepting the house from today and you'll be moving in and that's all I signed. They didn't give me any of this." (Tenant 13)*

Tenants sometimes expressed the opinion that Housing Executive staff did not fully understand this whole area themselves.

*"At the time when it was coming out, when they were trying to explain stuff I don't even actually think they knew themselves what it was and then they've just threw this in and they haven't knew what the impact's going to be on people and stuff, so I think they'd probably been as well trying to find out a bit more before they did try and put it in. I know it's governments and all just trying to make more money, but..."*  
(Tenant 1)



One tenant commented that the information that they would lose Welfare Supplementary Payment was only provided at the stage when they were signing the new tenancy agreement, by which point they had already decided that they needed to move.

*“At that point [when signing the forms for the swap] it was just like, I didn’t really care about the payment because I needed to be round here regardless, you know? I needed to be round here to fit my mummy into my routine and stuff like that so, regardless, I had to make the move anyway.” (Tenant 2)*

The most common process recalled by tenants was being notified that they need to pay extra rent via a letter/arrears notice after they had moved. In some cases this seemed to be the quarterly statement on their account. Ten tenants recalled receiving a letter stating their arrears.

*“No they didn’t say nothing. Because if I had of, now my housing association (staff member) he told me for me to get out quicker was to go on and try and get a swap. He says now most of the places are all two bedrooms, he says ‘you’ll find it very hard to get a three bedroom’ but that’s the only thing he like...” (Tenant 8)*

*“[Did they then give you any information about it? Did they give you letters or...?] Nothing. Just literally told me straight up ‘look you’re paying bedroom tax that’s it’. I asked them ‘is there anything I can do or anything I can apply for to help me out?’. No nothing. And I was just like, ‘Right whatever’. So I was like, ‘Fine do what you want to do then’. They take it out of my income support.” (Tenant 10)*

Ten out of the fifteen tenants interviewed claimed that they did not realise that the bedroom tax applied to them until they had received a letter from the Housing Executive saying that they were in arrears.

*“I was living here a couple of months and I received a letter from them ... It was to say that I was in arrears and I phoned up to speak about it and they told me it was because of the bedroom tax and I says to them ‘well I don’t pay bedroom tax, I was in a three bedroom and I moved to a three bedroom’ and they said ‘Yeah, but because we didn’t put you in that three bedroom, you asked to be put into that three bedroom to do the swap’. And I says ‘Well I wasn’t told that, otherwise I would have stuck it up there, you know, and waited until you’s ones got me somewhere else’ and I tried to fight against it but they just, they were having none of it like. I just wasn’t getting nowhere, to be honest.” (Tenant 8)*

*“It wasn’t actually explained to me. A letter came in to say that I had to pay £8 something and I was like, ‘What is this for?’. I don’t recall there being any discussion with the housing officer when I was signing that I was going to have to pay anything and neither does the guy who I exchanged with, who I would still see because he’s from around this area, and I would co-incidentally be staying up in the [location in Belfast] area still at the minute – but it’s downstairs, a friend has a downstairs apartment – so I’m able to see him and he has also said he didn’t know he had something to pay either.” (Tenant 9)*

*“I went down into them and asked them what I owed them money for ... cause my rent gets paid for, so I knew I wasn’t in rent arrears. I went down into them and I asked them, ‘What is this about?’. And then they explained to me it was the bedroom tax. And I was like, ‘Well why was I not made aware of this before you let it build up? Why not tell me, “Right you have to pay bedroom tax” so I know, because it’s leaving me short left right and centre with my money”’. (Tenant 10)*

Of the ten tenants who claimed they only knew that they would have to pay the bedroom tax after they had moved, six said or strongly inferred that they would have moved anyway. This was often because they had important reasons for moving in the first place, for example to be closer to family, and they made a decision at the time they would just have to find a way to make up the shortfall.

*“I think I still would have moved, aye, even though I’d lost it. I didn’t see it as a big deal at the time, £11 a week, but it adds up. When you’re paying it out of your benefits, it adds up then. But I didn’t think about it at the time.” (Tenant 11)*

Two tenants were clear that they would not have moved if they had known they would have to pay the bedroom tax.

*“If I would have been told I wouldn’t have done it; I definitely wouldn’t have done it because it’s nine pound a week out of your brew<sup>13</sup>; it’s a lot of money, specially for someone like me.” (Tenant 15)*

Another tenant, who had been aware of the bedroom tax prior to the move, but had thought two of his children were coming to live with him, said that he would not have moved had he realised the financial issues that would arise for him.

*“If I’d a thought I was going to end up like this? No, I wouldn’t have.” (Tenant 4)*

A third of tenants had experienced some sort of administrative confusion either by the Housing Executive or through their benefits, around the issue of the bedroom tax payment. For example one tenant was advised that they should be paying it, then that they should not, then that they should.

*“I lived in a flat around the corner that was three-bedroom, the same as here, and I moved into here in November with my two-year-old daughter... I didn’t pay bedroom tax for my flat but as soon as I made the move I was told I would have to pay. And then basically I got a letter that I didn’t understand that said sort of ‘you pay your landlord’ – it was from the Housing Executive – and say ‘you pay your landlord £0.00’ and I thought, ‘Right I’ll ring cause I don’t really understand this’ and I rang and the girl says ‘No you don’t pay nothing. Welfare Supplementary Payment, they’ll pay it’. I was like, ‘So I don’t even pay bedroom tax? I was told I did’ and she says, ‘No you don’t’. So then I got a phone call, it would have been a*

---

<sup>13</sup> ‘Brew’ is a slang term referring to welfare/unemployment benefit

*good lot of weeks later, just before Christmas, saying that I was £75 in arrears.”  
(Tenant 2)*

Another tenant could not get a clear answer in relation to what they were paying for:

*“Because see when I rang the Housing Executive and realised that I was getting this charge, they said...they didn’t even say it was bedroom tax, they first of all said it was because my son was living here, do you know what I mean? And I says, ‘What do you mean, he’s living here?’. So I had to go and I had to get advice from, there’s a lady, an advice worker round in the local community association and I went to her and I says, ‘I’m getting this charge and I don’t know what it’s for’ and she rang up and she was on the phone for a while and then she came back and said, ‘It’s because, they say it’s because your son stays there, your son lives with you’. And I says, ‘But he doesn’t live with me’. I says, ‘He stays whenever the grandson comes, but that’s only like once or twice a week.’”  
(Tenant 6)*

And others experienced complications with their benefits payments:

*“But then they’ve taken that off. Well they were paying it for, you know, down in the last house but they won’t pay for it here. My rent arrears and all’s going up. Where they’re taking money out of my benefit and stuff now to pay for it, but I’ll show you – I’ve got a letter there that I got last week – it just seems to be going up instead of going down.” (Tenant 1)*

Another tenant stopped asking questions about why they paid the bedroom tax for fear of influencing the benefits received by other family members.

*“So I went in and the wee girl that was available to speak to me that day didn’t deal with – she didn’t know very much about the bedroom tax and how it was affecting – and she says, ‘It’s actually really Housing Benefit you would need to go to, but I can tell you you’ll have to fill in a form, and then whoever stays with you, and if they’re getting help with their rent then they’ll have that reduced too’, which is catch twenty one, you know? I’ve only the two children, they’re both out on their own, they’re both claiming benefits, so they’re both getting Housing Benefit but it meant if I put down they’re staying an odd night with me they’re going to lose out on their Housing Benefit, was it worth it to do that to them you know? [So you didn’t?] I didn’t fill it in then.” (Tenant 7)*

#### **4.4 Stakeholders’ views on the information provided to tenants about losing Welfare Supplementary Payment**

Stakeholders raised concerns in four areas around what information is provided in relation to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and when this information is provided. The qualitative interviews with tenants confirmed that these concerns are justified:



- Concern that information is provided too late in the process i.e. at allocation stage, when the person is already very keen to move
- Concern that the information is not specific enough i.e. that people do not know exactly how much they will have to pay
- Concern that people have to rush to make a decision, that they don't have enough time to consider their options
- Concern that people are directed to another agency for more specific advice that the Housing Executive is not providing in a clear enough way

*"I don't feel like it is an informed decision - I think people are being informed at allocation point: when they are coming out of a hostel; when they have been on a list for ages. People are offered properties that are bigger than their needs and they are told they could be subject to the bedroom tax. I don't see anyone sitting people down and looking at the detail of what they would owe. And people are in a desperate situation and they just bury their head and will deal with it when it happens. The wording 'you may be affected', you know, means that people don't really know - it's all wishy washy. Think it is the same at point of transfer. When you are in a desperate situation and you just want a home for your family, you will say, 'Fine, we will deal with it later on'. It's not clearly communicated – don't see people being helped to do budgeting, working out what they would owe .... Seems to be difficult to sit down and do the more intensive detailed support ... People who are vulnerable and in crisis don't cope well with vague things that might happen in the future; they are living day to day and week to week." (Advice Agency)*

*"In our opinion the general awareness regarding SSSC is not there 'til we explain, payments for rent go direct to the landlord. Although people have been notified that they are in receipt of a WSP payment, it's not until they apply to move that we explain to them that they may lose this. So it's making people aware. Tenants are not making self-aware of it ... I feel that the message has not been loud and clear for some people." (Housing association)*

There was a sense from these discussions that communications by the Housing Executive and housing associations have been improving over time. For example, the development by both the Housing Executive and at least one housing association of a form to provide clarification that a discussion has been had in relation to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment (see Appendix 5 for copy of Housing Association form).

#### **4.5 Housing Executive staff experience of receiving information and training about the bedroom tax**

Team Leaders mentioned attending seminars on welfare reform that were held every few months and that they also used these as a source of information to cascade to their team of Patch Managers.

However, all four staff interviewed could not recall attending specific training on the bedroom tax and the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. Both Patch Managers did not perceive that there was a need for them to receive more training on the bedroom tax.

*“We’re trained enough on it. We’ve heard enough on it; we’ve had the presentations on it. Welfare reform, you know, we get updates on it.” (Patch Manager 1)*

*“It’s more, no I don’t think there’s been anything. There may have been the odd half-day kind of training for patch managers but there’s nothing that jumps to my mind. The way the Housing Executive are sort of... because as you rightly said at the beginning of the conversation, there’s so much, that we get sent through what we refer to as LSAN: so they’re Landlord Services Advice Notes, and they come through to us. They’re treated as policy, so once they come through to us it’s our responsibility to ensure that every member of staff has read it and implement anything that’s in relation to it.” (Team Leader 2)*

*“I mean, whenever it came in I was actually doing another job up in [X place] for a couple of years, so I haven’t really had any formal training on it. Now I’ve managed to sit in on a couple of informal chats about it, but I’m far from an expert in it and I don’t think even our patch managers who are dealing with this, some have a better handle on others, but I don’t think anybody would claim to be an expert in Universal Credit and social sector size criteria.” (Team Leader 1)*

Staff variously mentioned the portal that the Welfare Reform team constantly updated, the regular emails that the Team Leaders received, Landlord Services Advice Notes (LSAN) and policy updates which were shared with teams, which often included links to documents for Patch Managers to print out and take with them to use with tenants. The Team Leaders observed that the volume of paperwork and updating advice was considerable.

*“... it’s Landlord Services Advice Note, and we get a number of those. I have to be honest with you, more now than ever. There’s so much, especially in Landlord Services, because we just don’t only deal with the financial end of our business, we also deal with a whole lot of other things in the estate. So there’s LSANS that come through for everything in relation to housing, not just Universal Credit, not just rent account.” (Team Leader 2)*

*“We also have a portal where the Welfare Reform team constantly are updating and that’s sent to all staff regardless of what grade you are and it’s highlighted. As well as getting it on the portal, it’s also sent via an email from one of the Welfare Reform team just to point us in the direction of ‘have a look at your portal here, there’s updates on it in relation to Universal Credit’, so that’s kind of duplicated just to get people engaging in it and having a look and reading, because it’s maybe not so much the bedroom tax, but other things are kind of changing constantly, so they’re constantly having to send information through and they want staff to read it.” (Team Leader 2)*

All four frontline staff interviewed talked about the large changes that were occurring in the sector. They commented that the Housing Executive has undergone a process of structural transformation whilst at the same time in Northern Ireland major welfare reform changes, such as Universal Credit and the bedroom tax, have been introduced.

It emerged that frontline staff had received a lot of information from the Housing Executive about these changes and were having to continually adapt their working practices and processes to ensure that they kept on top of all the changes, informed tenants correctly and acted appropriately to manage tenants' accounts, including tackling the accrual of arrears.

All four frontline staff were particularly exercised about the introduction of Universal Credit, which they considered was having a significant negative impact on tenant rent accounts and which was taking up a lot of staff time.

*“100% adding a lot more work to our job, yeah, and the Universal Credit is just doing us all in.” (Patch Manager 2)*

The 'Transformation' programme that had recently been implemented within the Housing Executive, whereby Patch Managers had become responsible for overseeing tenants' rental accounts may have led to staff on the ground having a better understanding of 'their' tenants; however, it had also added to their workload, particularly with the introduction of Universal Credit as well as SSSC. It emerged that at times staff were struggling to make sense of the new payments system.

*“They're really facing a lot of changes all at once; the transformation process the Housing Executive is going through at the minute as well. There's an awful lot to try and take in. From a management point of view and from the patch managers and people on the ground as well, and I'm sure there will be mistakes made as a result of all this information coming in at once.” (Team Leader 1)*

*“We have a lot more to do on our rent account, between checking on bedroom tax, checking that should be paid, checking that they're getting the right amount, say they were only getting bedroom tax [i.e. welfare supplementary payment] for one; now someone else has moved out of the household so they apply for two, just it's quite a lot, there can be a lot of work involved in managing a rent account in comparison to before all this welfare reform. Because everything was on the one sheet, everything was processed by Housing Benefit and there was none of these different things from bedroom tax to universal credit to applying for the arrears, you know it's just a raft of things now. But there's nothing we can do about it – just get on with it.” (Patch Manager 1)*

#### 4.6 Housing Executive staff perceptions of the process experienced by tenants

Both Team Leaders emphasised the fact that it had so far been rare to need to deal with a tenant who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment. Team Leaders also emphasised that generally the number of transfers was low. However, while one Team Leader said that the average was six or seven transfers per month, another Team Leader said it was about 12 tenants per week, so the volume clearly varies across areas and teams.

*“... we are not completing this exercise all the time. We do not have that many transfers. A number of years ago it would have been part and parcel of business; you know a lot of people would maybe just decide, ‘I think I might like to move’. That doesn’t happen anymore. The culture has changed and people have changed how they think; your home is no longer somewhere to move about in, it’s your home, your home for life, so transfers is not something that people would come to you about unless there is a specific reason why they feel that they need to move. So, on average we might have about, say about six or seven transfers a month and that’s across eight patches. So, that’s almost 3,500 properties, so it’s not something that we’re doing day in and day out. When it comes to doing a transfer it does take a minute or two for the patch managers to sit down and think ‘Right what’s going to impact on this customer?, What paperwork am I going to need to bring out with me?’” (Team Leader 2)*

*“There certainly hasn’t been very many of them so far. Now there might have been the odd one who have lost, but it hasn’t been a big issue as such, and there have been one or two weren’t sure whether there would be Universal Credit or Housing Benefit claimants, you know that kind of thing, and there’s been a wee bit of come-back on that.” (Team Leader 1)*

Therefore, Team Leaders assumed that Patch Managers would need to actively check up on the information they needed to share with any tenant who was moving and would lose Welfare Supplementary Payment as a result. It was apparent that, in comparison with Universal Credit, bedroom tax and the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment was much less front of mind for staff.

The two Patch Managers interviewed had both dealt with tenants who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment:

- One had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment because he was a single unemployed man moving from his first Housing Executive two-bedroom property to a smaller two bedroom property which would be less expensive to heat. He was shortly due to turn 25, so would be entitled to increased benefit payments
- One had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment because the household comprised a mother and one child and they were moving from a three bedroom property to another three bedroom property

*“One of them was in receipt of bedroom tax [welfare supplementary payment]. But because she was moving from a three bed and it was one adult one child, I had to get her to sign a form that she would lose her bedroom tax.” (Patch Manager 1)*

The Patch Managers explained that they talked through the implications with these tenants and were assured by tenants that they would pay the extra required. This contradicted the view expressed by some tenants that they were not told by staff that they would lose Welfare Supplementary Payment and would have to pay extra because of the bedroom tax. Patch Managers asserted that they always explained to tenants about the implications of moving to a property that would be bigger than allowed for by the SSSC policy, before asking tenants to sign a form confirming that this was the case and ensuring that this conversation and the tenant’s permission was recorded.

*“It was one adult and one child and at that point I had the form with me because I knew the information before I went out, and I said to her, ‘You know you’re in a three bed; you were given that. Your bedroom tax has been mitigated for one of the bedrooms at the moment but if you go ahead and do this direct exchange you will lose this bedroom tax [mitigation], you will not receive it on the new property’, and she said ‘that’s fine’, and she signed the form for me. So I scanned that to the documents and also she has got her letter because she brought it in and I have that scanned to her tenancy as well, that she has been made aware that she has lost her bedroom tax.” (Patch Manager 1)*

It was clear that staff had experience of tenants complaining about the Housing Executive. Therefore staff appeared to be conscious of the need to protect themselves against tenant complaints by ensuring that they had the necessary paperwork and evidence to support the fact that tenants had been informed according to Housing Executive policy and procedures.

*“One of the things I do with people I sign up is in our tenancy agreement: welfare under-occupation, and I either put ‘not applicable’ or I would have the conversation ‘it is going to apply to you’, I put in the household, I would say ‘there’s two adults and one child, you’re moving into a three bed, come April 2020 you will be liable for that bedroom tax, currently you are mitigated for £11.03 or you would be in that area, that’s what you’ll have to pay.’ ‘Oh that’s not a problem’ is what I’m getting, and I say ‘well can you sign that we’ve had our conversation’.” (Patch Manager 1)*

*“We have to do a Financial Capability<sup>14</sup> with them, we have done and also when they go on the waiting list they would be offered Financial Capabilities, but nine times out of ten they don’t want to discuss it; they say they’re fine with money and*

---

<sup>14</sup> The Housing Executive offers a Financial Capability service, which aims to help improve customers’ ability to manage money well. The requirement for the service is normally triggered by an ‘event’ such as a new housing application, transfer, sign up, the tenant going into arrears, or a reduction in income/Housing Benefit due to circumstances including welfare reform. A pro forma can be used to assist in the assessment of the tenant’s requirements.



*they refuse it. We cannot press for it. What I write over it is 'declined' over the actual form. You know, I can't press them if they don't want to give me what they're spending on their Sky or what they're spending on whatever, you know their bills; you know, I can't press them for that information. I can offer it and we can point them – if there's any money worries, we have booklets in our sign-up pack, we have Freephone numbers for them to contact the helpline for various benefits if they feel they're not getting; they can ring this Make the Call campaign and things like that; we can offer them floating support, and floating support in our area is excellent and they work and are very good.”*  
(Patch Manager 1)

Whilst all four staff expressed the view that they understood the policy and that Patch Managers followed the correct processes of informing tenants, and obtained tenants' acknowledgement that the transfer would lead to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment, the contrast between this and tenants' experiences of the process reveals that there is a mismatch between what the Housing Executive is doing and what tenants need in order to fully understand the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment.

All four frontline staff were reluctant to identify that any confusion that tenants might have felt was because they and their colleagues were not sufficiently communicating to tenants what the impact of their moves might be.

*“When an offer goes out to someone we ring them...and we discuss their house size, do they need a three bed or who is going to be in the household. So, we would discuss that and we would advise them of the bedroom tax then, if it will affect them or not, and so they are informed then whether they want to go ahead and accept the property or not.”* (Patch Manager 1)

*“They're all made aware...when they're signing up for the tenancy we talk about the welfare, the impact of the bedroom tax and what I'm doing at sign up is that we've had the conversation that it [the WSP mitigation] will be done away with. And I get them to sign that we've had the conversation because we've had this discussion that they'll turn around come April of next year – am I correct it's still going to be the end of March it's going to be done away with, that hasn't changed? As far as I'm aware I'm telling them end of March, so basically from the 1st April 2020 they will have the bedroom tax will not be mitigated so I'm making them sign that we've had this conversation and dated at the time of sign up for properties that I know it will affect them.”* (Patch Manager 1)

*“There have been the odd person who has maybe one in [X place] and one in [X place] who have said that we didn't advise them about the bedroom tax whenever they signed up, but we have it documented on the file that they were advised, you know. Whether they don't really understand or don't take it in, you know, it's very hard, whenever you're signing somebody up – there's so many things you go through with them and the eventual effects of the bedroom tax is only one small thing in a long list of things. But there was a letter drop done about a year ago, maybe, advising people of all the, you know, about the bedroom tax, welfare reform and what could come as a result of it, or what would be coming as a result*

*of it, but I don't know; when people get letters from the Housing Executive I don't know what they do with them. I don't think they read them half the time, same as our arrears letters and Housing Benefit letters.” (Team Leader 1)*

However, staff recognised that tenants did not always understand the implications of moving and losing Welfare Supplementary Payment. They gave a number of reasons for this, based on their experience and perceptions.

- Tenants were used to their housing costs being paid for them and were not used to having to take responsibility for them.
- Tenants expected that ‘someone else’ e.g. the Housing Executive, would resolve any issues with housing payments on their behalf.
- Tenants often lived in the moment and were unable to grasp the implications of needing to pay additional rent in the future.
- Tenants were often vulnerable people who might have special educational needs or mental health issues and they could be hard to engage with – if those who were eligible did not give their consent to a financial capability assessment or to receive ‘floating support’, for example, then it was difficult to provide them with help.
- Tenants thought that they would be able to manage the payments but the reality was that when it came to the point at which they were informed to make additional payments, they felt unable or unwilling to do so.
- Tenants did not fully engage with what they were being told by Housing Executive staff; they don't always believe them.
- Tenants did not always read letters or communications from the Housing Executive.
- Tenants’ desire to move to a specific new property trumped any caution they might have about incurring costs in the future.

*“People accept the property. OK, they're signing, they understand they're going to lose it (WSP) but they think it's either never going to happen or they'll just fall into arrears or we'll go for deductions and it will come out of their benefits.” (Patch Manager 1)*

*“Because they're in social housing and they're just claiming benefits, do you know what I mean, they were just used to everything getting paid.” (Patch Manager 2)*

*“Or they're waiting until the last minute. I don't know what it is, but certainly there hasn't been people knocking down the doors saying, ‘What's going to happen next year?’, you know? Now there are one – or there probably are some – people that have put in transfer forms as a result of it, but certainly there's not a big issue made of it so far.” (Team Leader 1)*

*“I can think of no one in my two years of doing this, or two and a half, that I have come across who didn't know what the bedroom tax was. And even on a viewing you know I say like ‘who's going to be living here?’ and I would say ‘you know you would be liable for this bedroom’, you know, they definitely are au fait with it.” (Patch Manager 1)*



*“I do think it’s a cultural thing, we [Housing Executive] are a safety net as regards social housing and that, but there’s other organisations like the benefits office, social security and things; there is a cultural thinking that we, you know, ‘don’t worry about it, somebody will sort it out for you’ and but what’s happening at the minute, especially with Universal Credit is, that’s not happening. People are slowly but surely understanding that now through Universal Credit.”*  
(Team Leader 2)

Patch Managers described the options available to tenants for paying the shortfall in rent and the fact that in theory this process should be relatively straightforward for tenants.

*“We can give them a temporary rent card, they can pay at one of the local garages or I can take it in CallPay<sup>15</sup> – they can ring me and I can take it over the phone if they have their bank card with them – or, as you say, Direct Debit or Standing Order, any way to pay it.”* (Patch Manager 2)

We hypothesise that some Housing Executive frontline staff may be making assumptions that tenants know what the bedroom tax is, and that they understand the implications of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment and being eligible for the bedroom tax and how to pay the additional rent because these tenants don’t ask questions about it at the point at which staff talk to them about it. However, it is clear from our qualitative research with tenants that they do not really understand the policy, its application to them and, most importantly, the *implications* it will actually have for them, until they first realise that they are in arrears and owe money due to losing Welfare Supplementary Payment.

We also hypothesise that some Housing Executive frontline staff are struggling to keep up with the huge changes in the benefits system that are impacting on their tenants and that it is not a top priority for them to ensure that tenants are genuinely able to grasp the implications of their actions in moving to a new property where they will be subject to the bedroom tax.

When the Patch Managers explained how they would tell tenants about the impact on their Housing Benefit of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment, it became clear that this was a complex policy to explain in simple terms, with some confusion around percentages and amounts that tenants would be liable for paying themselves.

*“The percentage, what is it? Oh God, you tell them it’s, two bedroom, the percentage; how much one bedroom will be and if they’re in a three bed you know it will be... honestly the percentages are gone – I need to freshen up on those! I think it’s 8% for one bedroom and 12% for two or something. It’s not quite eight and eight is 16; something like that, you know. So they are made aware that it will*

---

<sup>15</sup> The CallPay system is used by the Housing Executive’s Housing Services Accounts units and Housing Benefit Overpayment units to process payments on behalf of customers. The system allows customers to make payment via either debit or credit card for a number of costs including rent and rates and Housing Benefit overpayment recovery.

*or will not affect them. It's always talked about one way or another at sign up. Or on offers, offers more so than on sign ups.”*  
(Patch Manager 1)

We hypothesise that whilst they do not want to admit it, there may be some confusion amongst staff around the application of the policy and the way in which payments are taken or clawed back by the benefits system administered by the Department for Communities.

*“Previously all you would have looked at is Housing Benefit or somebody paying their rent, now we have so many different deposits to take in. We have to first of all look at what Housing Benefit might be coming across. We then have to go and look at another tab, and see if there's a UDC<sup>16</sup> on: are they getting mitigated? So then you have to, so there's so much calculation, it's not all on one sheet. We now have to go and see is there bedroom tax, should there be bedroom tax? If there's not bedroom tax, why is there not? So then we have to email a girl called XX so it brings on a lot of work for us, so you have to be on top of that. And if it's stopped for whatever reason we then have to make sure, or equally if benefits is stopped...And the massive impact at the moment for us is that Housing Benefit has stopped for one reason or another but they keep paying the bedroom tax. We are now finding that our tenants are getting massive overpayments, like maybe £600 shoved onto their rent account from the DFC, Department for Communities, so we could go into a rent account and see...we're kind of used to them now but nobody is notified, I don't think tenants (are) notified, we're not notified and you would see maybe £600, £300, X amount and when we go in and view what that money is it will say a “claw back”, “bedroom tax claw back”. It's taken a long time; it could be for period six a year ago.”* (Patch Manager 1)

It was also apparent that there are issues around the language associated with SSSC and we hypothesise that this could be contributing to confusion about the policy amongst tenants.

- Official terminology for the policy is *Social Sector Size Criteria* but it is generally referred to as the *bedroom tax*.
- Official terminology for mitigation is *Welfare Supplementary Payments* but this is not used spontaneously by tenants or by some staff members. instead the concept of receiving payments which cover the cost of SSSC penalties is also at times referred to by staff under the umbrella term 'bedroom tax' – e.g. “in receipt of bedroom tax”.
- So when tenants lose Welfare Supplementary Payment this may be described by some staff as “losing bedroom tax”.

Whilst both Patch Managers struggled to identify ways in which the Housing Executive frontline processes could be improved so that tenants were better informed, one Team Leader identified some aspects that had been improved upon recently – such

---

<sup>16</sup> A User Defined Characteristic (UDC) is an indicator on the Housing Executive's tenancy management system, HMS.

as trying to inform tenants earlier when they first view a potential property and explaining more about the transfer process.

However, all staff felt that it was important that tenants were better informed collectively that the bedroom tax was coming in and that it might have an impact on them.

*“Maybe they should start putting wee adverts out again. Yeah to try and drill it into their heads like...it’s like putting it into the area then they say ‘we weren’t told’ and ‘yes, you were told’.” (Patch Manager 2)*

*“I think we have leaflets at our counter and that, but maybe something should go out from the Housing Executive to remind them all again.” (Patch Manager 2)*

*“... there’s much more we can do, certainly in the local office, but maybe centrally there could be better information produced that could be handed out or sent out. I can’t remember what the initial letter that was sent out was like now – it was some time ago. Certainly I get the impression that people need reminding.” (Team Leader 1)*

One Team Leader had been mentioning the bedroom tax at their recent quarterly interagency meetings with residents’ groups, but noted that this was likely to reach only a few tenants who might be affected. The Team Leader had not experienced tenants spontaneously asking about the bedroom tax; rather tenants were more likely to be concerned about Universal Credit if they had been migrated to this.

*“I suppose coming closer to the time, 2020 or whatever, obviously we’re going to have to and I’m assuming the organisation is doing that, but there’s going to have to be a lot of publicity surrounding it.” (Team Leader 2)*

One Team Leader expressed the view that the Housing Executive had too much of a ‘light touch’ in communicating with tenants about welfare reform changes and this wasn’t sufficient to really get past the barriers that exist. The Team Leader considered that it was particularly important to change the tone and style of communications because of the new responsibility required of tenants when they are migrated to Universal Credit.

#### **4.7 Tenants’ financial context**

Of the 15 tenants interviewed, only two were working and therefore had income in addition to benefits. All the other households were living on a range of benefits: Carer’s Allowance, Income Support, Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Employment Support Allowance, and/or Personal Independence Payments (PIP). One tenant received a small pension from her time in the civil service.

All respondents commented that it was a struggle to manage their spending and that they focused on the essentials of heat, electricity and food. Some had a particular

approach to trying to manage a 'budget', whilst others were less able to articulate how they managed their spending. In summary, for most tenants it was a juggling act: more of a case of working out how best to get by rather than sticking to a specific spending plan.

*"I know how to budget; I know how to look after my finances and stuff, but with the money I get at the minute it's that kind of goes into your food and your electric and what you need and all; you've basically nothing left. You can't pay anything out extra. You're just stuck in a rut, sort of thing." (Tenant 1)*

*"I think as long as I have my direct debits and the money coming out in gas and electric and whatever, I'm okay that way. If I didn't have direct debits then I'd probably go through all the money, to be honest with you. Other than that I just don't...I would look online, I do online banking and I would look online all the time and keep checking it just to make sure I don't go into the red or whatever." (Tenant 6)*

*"I would [budget]; just the only way I would sort of think of the budget is just to make sure that I have heat and that I have food and that I have everything in and then if I'm sitting with nothing then but I still have everything that I need. But it's hard, then, when it comes to the older boy and they're looking for these things and they're looking for that thing and you know you just can't do it. Not all the time like, but if I wanted to do something for them like, just after Christmas there was a sale on so I went and got the younger boys Easter clothes which are upstairs now. I just still have to go get the other boys clothes, it's sort of I just have to manage it." (Tenant 11)*

*"Well, shopping: I don't really do shopping, I'm not a very good cook but if you go in the cupboard now you'll get bread, cheese and a couple of tins of beans and stuff like that and that's it and milk, but if you look in the freezer you'll get them dinners, you know them dinners which are £1, so that's how you live. Just struggle on." (Tenant 15)*

Most tenants had no savings. One tenant mentioned their savings were for a 'funeral fund', others mentioned that they tried to put money by but it was often difficult to do this.

*"I had, like a savings fund; I called it a funeral – my 'funeral money' – so that if anything ever happened, you know, I had money to bury me ... from I moved in here it's just slowly went down and down to less than £1,000. I keep having to lift money out of that account to put it into my current account to keep the overdrafts going." (Tenant 6)*

*"[Do you have any savings at all?] No, not much no. I would have...I think I've £374 or something in the Credit Union but that's frozen because of loans; that's not mines anymore, you've to substitute one with the other. [... what sort of level would the loans be against that?] Well my loans are up to £4,000 now." (Tenant 11)*

*“I save with the daughter. She takes it out of my PIP every month and she puts it by for emergencies or whatever.” (Tenant 13)*

*“I do try to save but nine times out of ten something always crops up; so I can’t really save an awful lot, but generally my wages do me from month to month.” (Tenant 14)*

A number of tenants commented on borrowing money – particularly at Christmas.

*“My loan – what was it? – £ 600 at Christmas.” (Tenant 1)*

*“Well, like Christmas there, I would have borrowed £1,000. So if there’s something special coming up I would borrow, yes.” (Tenant 6)*

It is important to note that tenants were used to receiving full Housing Benefit, and not used to having any personal responsibility for paying rent themselves. Therefore, the need to take responsibility for making payments was a completely new situation for them.

*“Oh no, no. Because the rent automatically came out before you got your benefits your rent was paid but then when I moved here I was in arrears and they didn’t realise it.” (Tenant 13)*

#### **4.8 Tenant experience of seeking advice or assistance about the bedroom tax**

Only three of the 15 tenants interviewed had sought some form of advice or assistance outside of the Housing Executive in relation to the removal of Welfare Supplementary Payment. It was common for them to comment that they did not know whom else to contact. It appeared that there was some apathy around asking for advice or support and that this may have been because they were not sure where to go for help, they were used to not getting help, or when they had asked in the past they had not previously received useful advice or support from organisations. One tenant had approached their local MLA in relation to another issue and found them unhelpful.

*“I wouldn’t even know who to go to.” (Tenant 1)*

*“[And is there anywhere else you would think of going and asking for support and advice from? Any other organisations or...] I don’t know anywhere. Who do you ask, you know?” (Tenant 9)*

One tenant had spoken to a local community advisor and two had sought further information from ‘a government department’ and the Department for Communities respectively.

*“I did actually ring Department for Communities and they agree; they says ‘No we’re not paying it’ ... No I was just asking them ones you know because the girl had told me that I didn’t have to pay it and I was sort of asking them ones like,*



*'Whose fault is this? Do I have to pay this back, because I was told I didn't?', you know, because there could have been a chance that they could have says 'It wasn't your fault so we'll restart you, so you don't owe the money' kind of thing, and that's what I was hoping for because it wasn't my fault. But they says, 'No it's not our fault and we're not paying it for you', so... (Tenant 2)*

Two tenants commented that if they had known about the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment before they moved, they might have contacted Citizens Advice to talk about the options.

Some tenants felt that the Housing Executive did not care about them or the situation.

*"They could have explained it better to me. They could have told me from the start about it. But they didn't. And I actually don't think that they really care to be honest." (Tenant 8)*

*"The Housing Executive have in the last, I really haven't had to deal with them because I spent 19 years in one of their flats. I had it immaculate, I had it how I wanted it and I never had any issues. I'm not a silly person. They didn't have to come out for any silly things, to repair anything, nothing, so I had no call contacting them. But I can tell you that in those nineteen, twenty years, the Housing Executive as far as customer service goes have gone down the Suwannee, they've went straight to brown town, they've bypassed everything and they don't care." (Tenant 9)*

#### **4.9 Tenant experience of Financial Capability Assessment**

Similarly, in relation to the Housing Executive offer of a financial capability assessment, 13 of the tenants said they weren't offered one, or at least couldn't remember being offered one. One tenant recalled it being offered, but she had turned it down. Another had received an unscheduled visit from two advisers to her home. It is possible that this was because she had asked for financial help from the Housing Executive, but she could not say who they were or why they had arrived to ask her about her financial situation and was not conscious of any personal benefit from receiving the visit.

Overall it appeared that tenants had differing financial capabilities and that some were better able to budget and manage than others. More information in relation to this is available in the section considering how tenants are managing the shortfall.

*"She [contact at Housing Executive] was the one that rang me about it and she was really nice about it, you know? She did offer me financial help; she says 'Look, if you need some financial help to pay for this we can sort of work that out for you' and I was like, well you know. I probably would have took it but I didn't want to end up... I didn't because I was busy at the time; I was out and I didn't really give her a chance to explain anything to me and I just sort of says, 'No, you know it's okay; I'll get it from somewhere', and I got it from my brother. I just didn't*



*know if the financial help was going to leave me, whether they would pay it and then I owe them it, kind of thing. I didn't know what way it worked, so just if my brother does it then at least I know I've got a couple of weeks to pay it back."*  
(Tenant 2)

*"They had come out to me – that was after I had been to the Housing Executive – and demanded to know what I was paying money for. They had come out to me a couple of months ago; they came out to me and they were just basically asking about my monthly income, what I spend, what my money goes on things like that ... So I don't have a set amount every week; I try but it always goes pear shaped. Either my oil's ran out and I need to go and get more, or something's broken I need to replace it, or the kids need something. It's an absolute nightmare ... [And do you know those people who came out, were they from the Housing Executive? Do you know where they were from?] They were independent people, they said they were. They were kind of, they worked for the Housing Executive but they don't work for the Housing Executive."* (Tenant 10)

#### **4.10 Impact of the bedroom tax on tenants**

Tenants felt that whilst the bedroom tax they now had to pay might sound like a relatively small amount of weekly money, it was actually a considerable amount in reality, which soon mounted up over time.

*"It doesn't seem much [£9.19 a week] but when you have a child, you know, it is quite a lot."* (Tenant 2)

Most tenants identified a range of areas where they had felt the impact of having to pay the bedroom tax:

1. A major area of impact for five households related to their ability to do various things for their children, such as school trips or to undertake activities with them.

*"Well kids don't do after-school activities or anything, and stuff like that there."*  
(Tenant 5)

*"I've had to cut down like on everything. Like, I can't even get the house done up. I've cut down on the spend for groceries and stuff and it's, I don't know, just a couple of things ... Like with the child and all for school, you know if there's things to be paid for in school...like, there's some school trips she can't go on because I can't afford it, so then she's near losing out. Only for my mummy like, if I hadn't had my mummy like, she wouldn't be on any of the school trips. Her communion here in May, only for my mummy helping me out with that, I don't think I would have been able to do it, like."* (Tenant 8)

*"I would normally, my kids, I would normally just take them out where I would just be able to just treat them to random stuff. I can't do that, my shopping now I have to make sure it lasts me now, my oil I'm constantly worrying if that's going to run*

*out because I don't have the money now to go and get more oil kind of thing, my electric and stuff like that ... If I go and get my shopping – my essentials – if I go and get them that's fine but say then if my washing machine was to break, how am I going to replace that? I have to wait until another fortnight's time to get money to replace the washing machine and then struggle with the essentials.”*  
(Tenant 10)

2. Tenants talked generally about cutting down wherever they could – reducing spending on clothes, phone or Sky contracts, no longer running their car, budgeting in relation to heating.

*“I've cut the TV channels and stuff down ... instead of [you] know paying like a big package now you have to cut them right down and basically you get your money, you pay for your messages, your gas, your electric; as long as you have food in your cupboards and your house and home's stuff and then that's basically it ... very rarely get a night out or anything ... Aye, my phones: I used to have a contract phone and stuff and then I'm having to change onto the pay and go and simple things like that there.”* (Tenant 1)

*“Well, the heating I do it purposely, I only buy maybe three or four drums of oil and put it into the tank, I don't ever get an oil tanker out because there's people stealing it all the time and that would be a worry to me so that's why I would put in so little because then it wouldn't be that they're able to steal maybe 500 litres of oil.”* (Tenant 11)

3. In general, many tenants made comments about there being no margin in their budget, so they had no capacity to pay for things that were broken or doing things in their home that they might like to e.g. replacing flooring, decorating, or paying for something to be fixed.

*“[So have you changed maybe things that you're spending your money on or cut back on anything in particular because of it do you think?] Just more the clothing for the boys, because I have to have heat and I have to have shopping and I have to have electric and stuff like that so I always make sure that that's sorted first. Then whatever's left over, which sometimes isn't a lot by the time I'm finished, then when I would get my PIP I would sort maybe something for one of the boys.”*  
(Tenant 11)

*“My mate might phone me up and say do you want to go down for a pint and there's no chance... or do you want to go for a game of snooker or something, there's no chance of that either. I used to play darts and pool, now I can't even do that.”* (Tenant 15)

4. It was also clear that the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment had contributed to individuals' stress, as well as creating some family arguments. One tenant became upset during the interview, having discussed the situation of the issues with their home, their finances and the bedroom tax.

*“It stresses me out knowing that I owe money out that I should probably have, do you know what I mean? But yeah, it probably is difficult that way, I would lose sleep over owing money out and stuff, you know.” (Tenant 2)*

*“Well I’ll tell you what, when I found out I was paying it and all, I did sort of blame it on [my son] and say to him, ‘You know, because you’re staying here I have to pay this money’ you know?’ Because that’s the way: I didn’t even look at it as bedroom tax, it was like because my son was staying here two nights a week with his wee boy, I was being like, charged for it or something... Because of the friction he didn’t come round for a while, you know? There was a big fall out and all, and we didn’t see the wee one for a while.” (Tenant 6)*

*“No just I don’t know like, when she comes in crying saying that all her wee friends are away swimming or to the cinema like – stupid wee things – and like, I can’t do it with her. You know. And then it makes me down and like, there about eight months ago I was really low, I was really suicidal and stuff because I couldn’t do more for her, you know, like when she was younger we were out all the time and it’s just been really, really hard the last year and a half.” (Tenant 8)*

5. Tenants were trying to spend as efficiently as possible on food and heating.

*“I don’t get as much fresh fruit as I would like because by the time you get bread and butter and things like that there, like toilet roll, washing powder, all things that you can’t do without. Like, prices are going up in shops and it’s not only just one or two pence, like – they’re all going up anything from 20-50 pence, things. And I don’t buy as much fresh meat as I did either, and that makes a difference.” (Tenant 12)*

*“[I] cut down on food, heating, so that’s the way it goes.” (Tenant 4)*

Three of the 15 tenants had experienced no or little impact from the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. In two of these cases this was because they were now on a higher rate of PIP than previously, which was more than covering the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. The other tenant said that they had felt some impact but as they were working they had wages and other benefits related to a child that helped; however, in future when they lost the additional financial support for their child, they expected that money would be a lot tighter.

*“Now it’s not so bad. At the beginning it was hard because I wasn’t getting as much in my DLA benefit as what I’m getting now through the PIP. So it was kind of tight at the beginning but I sort of got used to it ... [So has your PIP changed then? Your PIP’s gone up?] The PIP’s gone up. [And why is that?] Well, when they did the assessment then for the PIP for changing over from DLA to the PIP they increased it so that I’m getting the high rate on both now, where I wasn’t before; I was only getting the mobility rate before.” (Tenant 7)*

#### 4.11 Impact on tenant rent arrears

Ten of the 15 tenants said that they had not been in arrears before they moved and became subject to the bedroom tax; this was generally because they received full Housing Benefit which was paid directly to the Housing Executive. A number of tenants mentioned needing to clear any arrears before being able to move.

*“Aye [I had arrears before] because I was working at the time and then ... I was put out of work and, see, between that and everything like trying to get signed back on again and then that’s where the arrears was [you] know built up, cause it takes you like so many weeks to get signed back on and stuff and that’s where all the arrears came from, cause I was in and out of jobs there and it’s all agency work you see, so you only get a couple of months here and a couple of months there and back and forward.” (Tenant 1)*

Those tenants who had accrued arrears previously generally noted some complications/confusion around their account.

*“From I started working. They messed my rent up from I started working, from the day and hour I started working. I think I started off at £700 worth of arrears because they messed all my rent up for about three months ... They kept calculating my Housing Benefit wrong whenever we lived in Newtownards, so they were telling me to pay one thing one time and then I was getting an arrear bill: ‘no you owe this, because you have to pay this’, and then I was paying that, so before I knew it, it was like up to about £700 and see trying to claw back from that? It’s just been continuous. I have had it cleared and then things crop up that sort of not an overly lot of arrears but I mean a couple of hundred pound, yeah.” (Tenant 14)*

*“I was yeah, and that was due to the Housing Executive as well, because when I moved from my flat to my house they never paid the rent. They never paid it, it was nothing to do with me, they just didn’t pay it for the first couple of months. And I was getting letters stating that I was in rent arrears and this that and the other, and I was like, ‘How can I be in rent arrears when I’m not technically paying the rent myself?’. So I went down to them and because I had moved into a new property my Housing Benefit wasn’t all sorted so I got put in rent arrears for that and I’m still paying them arrears back.” (Tenant 10)*

Eleven tenants said that they were now in arrears due to having to pay the bedroom tax. In addition, two tenants were in arrears post their move but had since managed to repay these. A significant issue seems to be that tenants were already facing what for them was a significant sum of arrears by the time they found out they should be paying the bedroom tax.

Tenants tended to know that their rent was in arrears and how they were paying the amount owed, but were vague about the sums of money involved.

*“Yes I am in arrears, yeah. Because of the bedroom tax. Because I didn’t understand. I know they sended me correspondence but it didn’t actually say. I*

*didn't know what to pay; it said something about this £9 but I didn't realise I had to pay it so the next thing I got a statement saying that I owed money. So I made a lump, a bigger sum payment, and then they've taken so much per week. I'm paying so much per week off it as well... I think I've caught up with it, yeah. And it's like £9 something to charge for the bedroom tax and I think I pay £10 because I borrowed money [from friends] and paid it; I can't even remember what it was.”*  
(Tenant 6)

Tenants varied in how they paid the bedroom tax and arrears. Four paid by direct debit, five paid by PayPoint card and six paid directly from their benefits. (We think that some tenants have *chosen* to pay through their benefits, whereas in other cases this has been set up directly by the Housing Executive/Department for Communities due to issues with arrears). Some found it easier to have an amount taken directly from their benefits as it stopped them spending it, and they found this helped them to reduce their arrears.

*“So I think it's £11 a week I pay, but I pay off £15 a week to get the arrears cleared as well ... That comes out of my sick money every fortnight, it just comes out of my benefit, where I don't have to go, because I would be a nightmare paying with a card. So I just decided then, let it come out of my benefits and I got them paid and I know it's there and it's gone, do you know what I mean?”* (Tenant 11)

*“[It comes out of your benefits?] Because to be honest with you I would just keep it and spend it, that's being honest with you.”* (Tenant 15)

One tenant was anxious to not go into arrears again – and now borrowed money from family members to prevent this.

#### **4.12 Housing Executive data on impact of bedroom tax on tenant housing arrears**

The Housing Executive provided us with the arrears history for the 100 tenants within the sample.

We analysed this data first for the 15 tenants who took part in the qualitative interviews. At the time of the analysis, the number of tenants in arrears had more than doubled, from six to 13 tenants, as had the amount of arrears since these tenants moved and lost their Welfare Supplementary Payment. According to the data, 13 tenants had accrued arrears; however, only 11 tenants admitted to being in arrears during the interviews. The data is shown in Table 2. In our view the difference between self-reported arrears and the picture emerging from analysis of rent accounts is due to the fact that some tenants are very confused about their rent accounts – what is coming in and what is going out – and do not keep a close eye on the detail. Where there were significant arrears tenants were honest about those.



**Table 2: Arrears position of 15 respondents who took part in qualitative interviews**

	Arrears level of interview sample...	
	...at point of loss of mitigation	...at quarter 3, 2018
<b>Number of households with arrears</b>	6*	13
<b>Total arrears (£)</b>	£652.77	£3,602.23
<b>Average arrears (£)</b>	£108.80	£277.09

\* Five respondents acknowledged during interviews that they had been in arrears before loss of WSP

Likewise the overall sample population shows significant arrears increases over the time period. Twenty-eight of 100 tenants had arrears of an average of £82.60 at the point of loss of mitigation. For the most recent quarter that we were provided with data, this had risen to 67 of 100 tenants having arrears, with an average of £242.81. The data is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Arrears position of full sample population (100 tenants)**

	Arrears level of interview sample...	
	...at point of loss of mitigation	...at quarter 3, 2018
<b>Number of households with arrears</b>	28	67
<b>Total arrears (£)</b>	£2,312.83	£16,268.49
<b>Average arrears (£ per tenant in arrears)</b>	£82.60	£242.81
<b>Nominal average arrears per tenant</b>	£23.12	£162.68

#### 4.13 Tenant response to paying the extra bedroom tax

Tenants reported managing the impact of their Housing Benefit rent shortfall in three overlapping ways beyond slipping further into arrears: getting on with it by managing your budget as best you can; borrowing money; and getting support from others.

##### 1. *Getting on with it / Managing your budget as best you can*

The main way that tenants managed the shortfall was through managing their budget as best they could; more detail was provided on this in section 4.10.

*“Just to get on with it. That’s it... Trying to keep costs down and you’re watching; you have to watch what you spend ... You have to get on with it. That’s what I mean: people deal with things in different ways but if you sat and worried about it*



*you'd be worried forever, you know what I mean? You just have to get on with it as best you can.” (Tenant 1)*

*“I would do a lot of shopping in Lidl and stuff now, even for, like, their wee clothes and stuff; for the child and all. Whenever they get clothes in and stuff, they're quite good and I would go there for them; they're quite cheap. So yeah, I would use different brands now, yeah.” (Tenant 2)*

*“I would have started paying the tax and that over 12 months where I used to pay six months and six months, so just started spreading payments out more. What other things were there...there were a few things lately I had cut down on, I'm trying to think of the direct debits; took my phone out and I don't use it anymore.” (Tenant 6)*

## 2. Borrowing money

Seven tenants mentioned borrowing money from family and friends to help them get by. Three mentioned borrowing through the credit union. One tenant mentioned that she would rather borrow from her brother than let arrears build up.

*“Owing my brother money, because obviously if I don't have a tenner every week for the rent I'm going to go and get it off him, and then that's building me up more with him. So at the minute, like, I think I owe him about £700 ... I'm managing it because I'm borrowing. What I'm doing is, I'm putting in a tenner a week so that keeps me 80p sort of in front every time, so I'm like; I think I'm like £5 odds in front ... No I'm not that type of person [to let arrears build up] I can't do that you know – mentally in my head I would go insane. So I have sort of like anxiety, and to do that I would literally be sick if it ever built up too much and just can't pay it kind of thing.” (Tenant 2)*

*“That's friends and family like, but then they lend me it to their next dole or my next dole. Everybody works fortnightly and stuff. When you're on the dole it's that's the way you work it. Somebody will get their dole one week so you get a fiver or tenner for gas or electric, so that's just the way it goes.” (Tenant 4)*

*“Aye normally I would borrow from my mummy mostly, but I try to cut it out that it's not constant – it's maybe once a month or maybe once every two months – and then I would make sure that I have the money to back it up to pay it back and when I'm going to pay it back.” (Tenant 11)*

*“Yes I've borrowed money off my daughter like but then your dad borrowing money off your daughter like, is bad, but I try not to like, I'd rather do, it depends what it is. If it's electric I'm going to have to borrow money but if it's the likes of a pint of milk or something I can do without, I can drink water do you know what I mean that way?” (Tenant 15)*

### 3. Getting support and help from others

As noted above, friends and family often helped tenants by loaning money. In addition to financial help, the tenants we spoke to described getting support from others in a range of ways, through: cooking meals, buying things for children, and/or helping them manage their budget.

*“No well, it comes in – my ESA comes in – every fortnight, and then the DLA comes in once a month, but when that comes in once a month it’s my daughter that gets that, and she makes sure there’s enough money left in to pay the Sky and whatever else, and that’s taken out of that before, and then she puts so much away for savings for me and then she will say to me, ‘is there anything you’re getting this month and what do you need, and how much will you need to get it?’, and she’ll always give me a couple of pounds for my pocket but the rest she always makes me leave it in the bank in case I decide I want to buy something or anything come up that I have a couple of bob left.” (Tenant 13)*

*“There’s times I wouldn’t have heat, there’s times I’ll go up to my sisters and get a bit of dinner and stuff, it’s just what way if you’re stuck at the weekend, what can you do, all you can do is go up and say, ‘stick us in an extra bit of dinner’ or what have you.” (Tenant 4)*

Three tenants noted that Housing Executive staff had been particularly helpful. One tenant commented that the Housing Executive had been very helpful at getting in touch with them and looking to work out the best way to tackle their arrears.

*“Yeah but I was talking to a guy from the Housing Executive, he was really good like, (staff member) I think it is, he said; he phoned me and says, ‘Just pay £20 a fortnight’. So from, I’ll pay them £40 tomorrow and after that I’ll pay them £20. [And have they reduced it then?] They have reduced it, fair play to them. They reduced it. The guy came out and says, ‘Well if it’s you’re leaving yourself stuck’ so.... [So you don’t know how they’re doing that but they’ve said it’s not going to be £40 it’s going to be £20 a fortnight?] Yeah. I don’t know how they’ve done it, like, so he explained it to me but I’ve a head like a sieve and ... He was saying something about the dole and this. He explained it to me but it just goes out of my head you see so. Sorry about that.” (Tenant 4)*

#### 4.14 Tenants’ longer term plans for paying the bedroom tax

Most of the tenants had no specific plans or ideas about paying the bedroom tax into the future beyond what they were already doing. They felt they just had to get on with it as best they could, but some could not see an end to their current circumstances and/or could not think about the future. One tenant noted that they could not keep borrowing money from family and friends.

*“Sorry it’s working okay but I can’t see an end, I think I’ll always be, I’ll never be in front, I’ll always be paying back, paying back, paying back, you know what I mean?” (Tenant 6)*

*“So there is no money. I cannot borrow anymore. I would not dare ask. It would just be brass necked of me to ask anyone for anything, you know? So, no. There is no money anywhere.” (Tenant 9)*

*“[What do you think going forward: sort of the next year or so – how do you imagine things panning out for you?] I don’t know. [Do you not think that far ahead?] No. I’d love to be able to, but I can’t.” (Tenant 10)*

Two of the fifteen tenants mentioned looking for work; one of these was a young mum who talked about looking for work when her daughter was able to go to nursery, the other was an older man. It did not appear that finding work was going to happen quickly for either of these tenants as the young mum’s daughter would not be able to go to nursery for another year and the older man had already been looking for work for some time.

*“See it’s sort of I’m stuck that way. I would love to get a job and go out and work cause you know the child, nursery is actually taking her a year early for me, so I would love to go out and work but it’s just I couldn’t have a carer come into my mummy, you know? She’s too proud and she prefers me and it’s hard that way because she does need me so many hours a day.” (Tenant 2)*

The idea of renting out a room was also prompted with tenants (although this may be against the Housing Executive policy). There was general reluctance amongst tenants to rent out a room – either because the room was occasionally used by a family member, or because they did not think it was large enough to let out, or simply they did not like the idea of there being a stranger in their home. One tenant said that they would consider renting to a family member.

*“Possibly a family member maybe, aye, but not a lodger. My kids would kill me. You don’t like strangers in your house so...” (Tenant 4)*

*“You see, you can’t do that [rent out a room] with the Housing Executive.” (Tenant 7)*

The two tenants on higher rate PIP were less worried about the future, as their benefits had increased so money was less tight.

Some tenants were generally aware that there was not necessarily smaller housing stock available for people who might want to downsize to a smaller property.

*“I couldn’t tell you. I know they do an odd three-bedroom bungalow but I thought most of them were two-bedroom, but if they had have done the one bedroom I would have asked to get one of them instead.” (Tenant 13)*

#### 4.15 Housing Executive staff perceptions of tenants' ability to pay the bedroom tax

The few tenants that staff were aware had lost their Welfare Supplementary Payment, had struggled to make the payments and were accruing arrears. Staff anticipated that this would be the main impact on tenants and therefore on the Housing Executive. Staff were not able to suggest what impact the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment would have on tenants beyond this inability to pay and the prospect of becoming further behind with payments.

*"I feel for them...it's through no fault of their own this has been forced upon them. You know a family home, maybe everybody has left home and now they're going to have to pay for two bedrooms that they never had to before, or one bedroom, or whatever the case may be. And a lot of them, because it's a family home, they're the ones who probably won't want to change. That'll be the sad bit, but anyway only time will tell." (Patch Manager 1)*

*"Dealing with Universal Credit and of course then we also have bedroom tax as well, which is at the moment mitigated. So you mentioned to me about the impact: to my knowledge there hasn't been much, it'll be next year when it'll happen, when we'll see the big problem." (Patch Manager 1)*

All Housing Executive frontline staff were aware that they did not have sufficient numbers of smaller properties for people to downsize into. They were unsure exactly what would happen but anticipated that tenants would build up considerable arrears as they would be unable or unwilling to act to pay the shortfall caused by the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment. One Team Leader identified that affected tenants might borrow money from relatives, seek help from the voluntary sector, increase their usage of food banks, and/or increase usage of local money lenders.

Housing Executive frontline staff felt that most tenants would not be able to pay the shortfall in rent and that rent arrears would increase dramatically as a result of mitigation ending.

*"I think the arrears will definitely go up. I can't see them paying it. I mean they're all something like that young lad too, that direct exchange, but they all know, anytime I'm in, or any of them I'm going this bedroom tax and all dread it and they're all oh no they're all going to take £8 or something – how much will it be? £7 or £8? – and you're talking to them young lads who are sitting there in them houses, have access to children, who probably don't see any way... I can't see them ones paying it." (Patch Manager 2)*

Their fear of this was compounded by their daily negative experiences with tenants accruing arrears due to Universal Credit. Whereas Housing Benefit might take three to five weeks to process, Housing Executive staff knew that payment would be made directly into the rent account. In comparison, Universal Credit payments had been taking up to eight weeks before payment was made to the tenant and staff were limited in their ability to take deductions directly.

*“Universal Credit has had a major impact on (arrears) since December 2017 so really that just adds to the arrears and it’s only going to be a small amount in comparison to what Universal Credit has done to us. So I think bedroom tax will just tag along with the disaster of Universal Credit on rent accounts.”  
(Patch Manager 1)*

The tenant who had lost their Welfare Supplementary Payment and then moved onto Universal Credit as a result of losing his job and having to reapply for benefits had gone much deeper into arrears as the result of losing mitigation and delays in Universal Credit payment.

*“Well we’ve been waiting on the Universal Credit now coming though so that’s why there’s arrears there, you know what I mean? So it’s more than what he was; I mean he’s way up to £600 odd in arrears. What was he when he came into me?...When I took him over he was only £14.” (Patch Manager 2)*

Whilst staff presented a general view of tenants as being focused on their own specific circumstances at that moment of time and overall not looking ahead and thinking about the future impact of the bedroom tax, clearly the message about the bedroom tax had got through to some tenants. Both Patch Managers shared examples of tenants who had made decisions not to transfer to properties they would under-occupy and tenants who were anticipating being impacted in future and had actively downsized in advance.

*“I remember a lady coming in then, and she was in a three bed and she wanted transferred to a one bed because she knew it would impact her. So that’s four or five years ago when I can remember her at the counter talking to me about the bedroom tax and she was preparing herself and she did actually end up transferring.” (Patch Manager 1)*

*“I did get a girl did want to downsize. She did downsize too; she said she didn’t mind because she’s getting prepared for next year.” (Patch Manager 2)*

*“I had another wee girl too...she was in a three bedroom; this girl was in a three and the wee girl was going to go to her three and she was going to go into her two, just there in October too, but she would have lost her bedroom tax the wee girl, she wouldn’t go then.” (Patch Manager 2)*

Patch Managers were also conscious of alerting tenants to the future impact of the bedroom tax on those who were under occupying their properties. One talked about encouraging tenants to register on HomeSwapper so they could match with people looking for larger properties.

*“The tenants or people can register for HomeSwappers (sic). They go on and register with them and say, for example, they are in a three bed and they want to downsize to a two bed, and equally someone in a two bed wants a bigger property, they can find each other on HomeSwappers and they can approach us and they can request a direct exchange OK. So we would ask people to sign up*



*for HomeSwappers, register for it, because of the impact come 2020.” (Patch Manager 1)*

*“It could have a positive impact for people who are overcrowded to link in with people, so HomeSwappers is a good thing in that respect and it may get people to swap.” (Patch Manager 1)*

Patch Managers were also conscious of trying to manage actively tenants who were significantly under-occupying and encourage them to move to a smaller property. However, they recognised that it was too early to tell what tenants would do if mitigation ends as planned in March 2020.

*“I have a person who signed up who succeeded a four bed property, a single man, and...I’ve put him on for a transfer and I’ve asked him to do HomeSwappers as well. I have to try and get him sorted and try and get a family who needs a four to try and find to swap. So these are all the challenges we have on top of all our other everyday life in a Patch Manager role. But I think some will benefit from it. I do think some will definitely register and will downsize... Whilst they’re having it paid for them they’ll stay put but I think when it hits their pocket or their benefits I do think they will look to change.” (Patch Manager 1)*

#### **4.16 Stakeholders’ views of the impact of the bedroom tax on tenants**

Stakeholder views on the impact on tenants were consistent with the subsequent qualitative research with tenants. The advice agency suggested that people were cutting spending and that the agency was seeing increased levels of stress and anxiety around this issue. Housing associations and the Housing Executive commented that they were aware that arrears were accruing for some tenants and they had mixed views as to whether tenants would try to downsize in future.

*“There are people who aren't paying the shortfall and then just falling into arrears ... it can take a while for that to accumulate ... It might be £10 a week over a prolonged period. Some people are just waiting for it to become an issue. Others who will be more afraid - they will cut back on food, heating, extracurricular activities for the children. So its quality of life that is really affected.” (Advice Agency)*

*“We did research with lone parents whom they thought would be affected by SSSC. Our financial inclusion officer discussed finances with them over a six month period. We found the issue was that they didn't have enough income, it wasn't that they had excessive use of their income.” (Housing association)*

*“Home is home, if you have lived there a long time, raised children there; also the cost of moving is prohibitive for some people. Even if you are to transfer you don't know what the property is like that you would be moving to. You may have put a lot of money into a property [refurbishing with new bathrooms and kitchens] - been working while that has happened - and then maybe you became unwell and that is*



*why you are on Housing Benefit - then it's a lot to be expected to move and leave all that ... Also then there is the fact that the transfer list doesn't work - if your accommodation suits you in every way except that you got an extra bedroom then you would only have 10 points - and we don't see people getting allocations even with 20 points. I think majority of people will try to stay and pay." (Advice Agency)*

#### **4.17 Tenants' information and support needs**

As 10 out of 15 tenants did not know they would have to pay bedroom tax until they moved, there was a strong emphasis from tenants on the need for clear explanation of what was going to happen at the start of the process, so that they knew about the bedroom tax and could think about how to manage paying it.

*"No it wasn't until after I signed it, you know? I think anybody in future, they could explain it to them better make sure they know that." (Tenant 12)*

*"During the moving process they could have ... made me more aware. Like, when you move into this house, 'You know your supplement you get for being ... oversubscribed in the bedroom? You'll lose that whenever you move.' Then I could have said to them, 'Well why, because I'm still moving into a three-bedroom house?' ... I would have known. I would have been a lot more wiser. It wouldn't have made my decision any different... I'm saying because of more affordability and stuff, but from practical terms, I mean manageability and stuff..." (Tenant 14)*

It was clear from what tenants said that providing specific information about the financial impact on them would have reduced a lot of frustration.

*"For them to be more with me, honest, and talk to me about it, actually tell me, give me the information ... about the bedroom tax, about how it would affect me and things like that, to know all that information first. But no, they didn't tell me all that. It was like they were setting me up to fail. They wanted me to move for me to owe money like that, for me to lose out on money knowing that I can't afford it... Not once did they give me advice, not once did they give me help, not once did they give me any information about it. I was told the bedroom tax would not apply to me when I moved. And I was, 'Right, that's fine. You're the Housing Executive you know best. It's you that has properties; it's where my rent comes from: no problem'. Then I signed the piece of paper to swap tenancies with the girl ... in here and ... thought everything was fine, everything was going great, then I get hit with a letter saying I owe them money and that's when everything comes out then. And I'm like, 'Why did it have to take for that? Why not just tell me straight up?'" (Tenant 10)*

Tenants frequently suggested a TV ad campaign, or a leaflet to clearly communicate the bedroom tax. Some suggested that a phone line should be available so they could talk to someone about it, or the possibility of arranging a face-to-face meeting. Whatever the means of communication, tenants felt that the information had to be clear, especially about the amount they would need to pay.

*“[Would it be useful to have a detailed breakdown which says this is what it’s going to mean in terms of money?] I think it would be. Saying a percentage to a lot of people, it just doesn’t mean anything to them.” (Tenant 7)*

*“Aye, maybe saying over a monthly basis, yes it’s £10 a week, but this is what you’re going to have to pay your bedroom tax; you’re going to have so much monthly, or you’re going to have to find a way ... to pay it, and what you’re paying it from.” (Tenant 11)*

Some tenants mentioned that other tenants needed to know about the loss of mitigation that is likely in the future. They were concerned about the impact it would have on many people.

*“I just don’t understand why, if it’s not coming in to 2020, why they can still take it off me now? ... They should have made that quite clear to people because I don’t think they’re making it clear to anybody that if you move in between now and 2020 you will be getting charged the bedroom tax.” (Tenant 13)*

*“I think a lot of the younger families nowadays think they’ll deal with that when it comes. They don’t stop and think, ‘How am I going to manage that, am I going to be able to manage it?’ ... I think the younger families especially need to be made more aware of exactly how much they’ll be paying. They think it’s not going to be just a couple of pound.” (Tenant 7)*

*“To be honest I just think it’s all mad... it’s just going to make a lot of people homeless ... a lot of people aren’t going to be able to afford to pay the bedroom tax, like they’re going to get warnings and they’re going to lose their house and they’re going to be homeless and then there’s going to be a lot of suicidal people as well, you know, and there’s already a lot of suicides going around. You know I just I don’t agree with any of it at all.” (Tenant 8)*

#### **4.18 Housing Executive staff views on information and support for tenants**

It was clear that frontline staff were spending considerable time chasing tenants for rent arrears, mostly because of the change as a result of Universal Credit, but also in the few cases they had encountered with tenants who had lost their Welfare Supplementary Payment and had got into arrears.

*“When he went into the house then, he knew he had to pay the £8. I met him I don’t know how many times, ‘You’ve to pay that’ and I sent him a rent card said to him and he says ‘Yes yes, I’ll pay it’ and some weeks he paid it and some weeks he didn’t.” (Patch Manager 2)*

Both Team Leaders mentioned that the floating support service was useful at helping tenants who needed more hands-on help to manage their rent accounts, but to do this it was necessary to get tenants’ signed consent for their details to be shared with outside agencies, which wasn’t always possible.

*“People – mainly people with mental health issues, are probably the ones that we come across most – people who won’t interact with other people even if they are aware of something: they’ll not do anything about it. Those people we try to bring in floating support to help, but they won’t go; you have to get their permission to do that and they won’t always give you that permission.” (Team Leader 1)*

Staff appeared reluctant to identify ways in which they could provide additional support to tenants as they clearly felt that they were overloaded with responsibility and issues as a result of transformational change occurring alongside Universal Credit migration.

*“The arrears work and then we have our allocations, we have our void properties, then we have people leaving properties, abandoning properties. We have all that. And then we have people who are getting put out because of their race and intimidation: all different things that are an awful lot so us, me personally and we were saying the accounts should go away from us now...We have not time to sit to do what you should be doing. I mean, I was out there this morning and I’ve done about four Universal calls to try and get these ones to ring up and get their Universal, to sort out their Universal Credit. So and again, I’ve also got tenants who have died and want to change – know taking over succession – I was out at two calls there this morning doing that, you know what I mean, so it is various different work which we all don’t mind but this is just taking us to another level.” (Patch Manager 2)*

#### **4.19 Stakeholder views on information and support for tenants**

From the stakeholder discussions there was a general sense that everyone needs to make sure that everything possible is being done to communicate to tenants about the possible loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment currently, as well as the loss of mitigation for everyone considered to be under-occupying post March 2020. Stakeholders commented that tenants had a right to this information as early as possible so that they could work out how they might respond to it.

*“I do think that people would benefit from seeing somebody face-to-face to sit down and work out what loss of income is going to look down. Just sitting down with people and offering them to look at income and expenditure - and work out the actual numbers and talk to them about what they might mean. Understand that pressure to get things turned over quickly to get people into homes – but they could, just to give people a bit more time to think it all through. Better to bring in a tenant who knows what they are taking on rather than one that will fall into arrears.” (Advice Agency)*

The Advice Agency also called for clarity in relation to a number of areas:

- In England Discretionary Housing Payments have been used as mitigation in relation to the Bedroom Tax. This has not been the case in Northern Ireland

and the Advice Agency had concerns about this policy theme and whether there would be developments in this area in Northern Ireland.

- The Advice Agency had dealt with some calls that would suggest that a small number of housing associations could be holding back-dated Housing Benefit on account/rent being paid in advance to stave off future arrears. .
- Concern that housing associations may start to allocate homes based on people who they believe will not go into arrears. Again, the Advice Agency had dealt with some calls that suggested this might be happening, particularly for example in relation to single fathers.

#### **4.19 Housing Executive staff perceptions of the impact of the bedroom tax on the organisation**

The Patch Managers and Team Leaders interviewed were fearful of the impact on their roles and the arrears that would build up when the bedroom tax was no longer mitigated from April 2020. They considered that Welfare Supplementary Payment mitigation against bedroom tax was essential for preventing further increases in arrears.

*“We’re aware, certainly as regards our arrears recovery, we’re aware arrears are creeping up while we’re waiting for payments to come through ...”  
(Team Leader 1)*

*“We’re absolutely swimming in debt for want of a better word, with people whose rent arrears has sky rocketed, but we’ve other things that are concerning people with regards to, you know, worried about evictions and all that sort of thing so that’s kind of taken over, but it’s also because there has been little to none cases, really, to speak of.” (Team Leader 2)*

The Patch Manager dealing with the tenant on Universal Credit related how much work had gone into trying to stop his arrears accruing and encouraging him to make payment.

*“I do the arrears every week so I would know that. So I made contact first of all. Then he said to me that he was going to set up a Standing Order; that fell through, then we done arrears visits, one, two, three, and then I sent him a first letter.”  
(Patch Manager 2)*

Team Leaders explained that confusion between the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities (DfC) regarding Universal Credit had added to their workload considerably. They felt that tenants were being misinformed and that mistakes were being made in the processes and payment systems. They identified that Housing Executive staff were now unable to see the full picture of what was happening with housing payments to Universal Credit claimants and this was causing increasing arrears.

*“We’ve been meeting up with the Social Security Agency recently because we found out that they actually don’t fully understand how the Housing Executive works, so the way they were explaining Universal Credit process to our tenants was not exactly lining up with what actually happens on the ground, so although they have obviously, they know exactly what’s happening in relation to Universal Credit, how it works in practice within social housing is different. We do receive Universal Credit payments in, but they come in in batches: they don’t go into the rent accounts right away so there’s a delay, so arrears accumulate. So it’s quite complex and complicated so we found that by having meetings and getting together with social security, you see, that we’re able to explain to them how we work so they can tell our tenants exactly what, because what was happening was, arrears were occurring unnecessarily because people were being ill advised. It’s so complex because of our systems don’t match up with the Universal Credit systems.” (Team Leader 2)*

Patch Managers expressed confusion about the way in which deductions and clawbacks occurred. The Department for Communities was clawing back overpayments of Welfare Supplementary Payments for some tenants which could be for large amounts, so they were instantly in arrears. This Patch Manager observed that the Department for Communities was communicating this to the Housing Executive but not directly to the tenant.

*“The Department for Communities seem to be on top of these overpayments of bedroom tax and this is what is happening at the moment...they are clawing back but they’re way behind, so something that stopped maybe a year ago, they’re now only clawing back the bedroom tax, the overpayment. Now it’s a true arrear – they’re entitled to claim it back – but what they’re not doing is writing to the tenant, to the best of our knowledge, and telling them, you know, ‘We are clawing back £600 of bedroom tax’.” (Patch Manager 1)*

Frontline staff were conscious that the Housing Executive waiting lists were considerable and that it was unlikely that affected tenants would be able to downsize easily. Both Team Leaders described how some estates used to be less popular but this was less the case now. In addition, in some locations housing stock was being reduced. For example, one Team Leader mentioned that an old tower block in Larne was due to be demolished within the next year and 70 tenants would need to move to new accommodation. The Team Leader questioned how the tenants could all be moved into properties which they would not under-occupy.

Staff mentioned the fact that some of the two bedroom housing stock was small and the second bedroom was not suitable for one person to occupy, yet it would be classed technically as a two bedroom property.

*“There’s bigger two bed and there’s smaller two beds, you know what I mean? But some of them are really, really honestly tiny.” (Patch Manager 2)*

They wanted to know what the Housing Executive’s plans and policy would be to help affected tenants downsize.



*“I’m worried that it’s a bit of a lull before the storm.” (Team Leader 1)*

*“I mean, I don’t even think we have nearly enough time, you know, nearly enough time to sort this out. As I say back to that, we don’t have, number one we don’t have the accommodation.” (Team Leader 2)*

*“There will be those who get help from other relatives and all that kind of thing, but I think there will be those who will be just go into debt, and I think we need to be clear on our policies, what we do with those. If we don’t have houses we can easily transfer them to, to me it doesn’t seem fair to be penalised, even though they have been told a year or two ago, if we don’t have the stock to transfer them to I think we need more guidance from the Centre (i.e. NIHE HQ), how we treat those people in the next lot of months. There will be those who won’t be able to pay their arrears or will be struggling to pay the arrears and it will... we already have people relying on food banks within our estates; that’s going to increase further if we’re insisting that our tenants pay a shortfall.” (Team Leader 1)*

*“I mean, certainly, more social housing of the right size would help and I know we’ve been pushing for years to be allowed to go back to new builds, which has sort of been taken over by the housing associations, but it has never reached the level that’s required or the level that the Housing Executive produced whenever we were funded to do it. There’s probably an element of that. We can certainly promote, as we’re trying to do through our housing solutions people, promote other housing options, you know in the private sector etc., but certainly, more social housing of the right size would certainly help. Plus obviously the gearing up staff for whatever changes are coming, to deal with it.” (Team Leader 1)*

In addition, staff pointed out that the Housing Executive’s own allocations policy is different to the SSSC policy. Therefore, tenants are eligible for bigger properties and are allocated properties which they will then under-occupy. As the Housing Executive does not have many one-bedroom properties, single people are offered two bedroom properties under Housing Executive allocations policy and single people with access to children may also be offered three bedroom properties. Staff emphasised that these groups of tenants are likely to be significantly impacted and are likely to have limited choice: they will not be able to downsize so they will have to pay the bedroom tax.

*“We don’t have the properties to facilitate people. Say it’s a one person [household], we don’t have very many one-bedroom flats or bungalows or houses, we wouldn’t have one bedroom houses, so we’re not, we don’t have the stock, either, to facilitate the people now with this bedroom tax coming in. I have known in the past, years ago whenever I worked another district, where we were giving single people three bedroom houses because there wasn’t a waiting list, so that’s going to massively impact, because it’s not going to take into access to children.” (Patch Manager 1)*

*“There’s a hell of a lot in my area that are just young lads sitting that are going to lose all this bedroom tax.” (Patch Manager 2)*



Staff also highlighted anomalies regarding allocations policy for disabled people, and that under the bedroom tax they would not be entitled to extra space for their equipment.

*“We also have, for example, people with disabilities: we may be...under our current rules you’d be assessing someone for an extra bedroom if they have maybe equipment like oxygen and that sort of thing. The Universal Credit rules are maybe a mismatch there; they might deem the person not maybe meeting the threshold of a certain disability and therefore would not require an extra bedroom. I mean, that’s a lot of our assessments, a lot of our transfers, a lot of our tenants.”*  
(Team Leader 2)

Team Leaders emphasised that there needed to be closer alignment between the policies coming from the Department for Communities around welfare reform and Housing Executive policies.

One Team Leader expressed great concern as to whether the Housing Executive would be able to function as an organisation if arrears continued to accrue at such a rate, as this would impact on the ability of the Housing Executive to fund its work – from repairs to home improvement schemes to staff jobs.

*“The rent money that we take in, like any other housing association, pays the wages; it pays for schemes, it pays for works to properties, upgrading our properties, it pays for everything. If we’re not getting the rent money in then all of that stops, so I really seriously don’t know. I mean, at the minute it’s serious with regards to our rent arrears, they’ve gone up so far over this last year and they’re rising and rising and rising.”* (Team Leader 2)

Staff were all aware that within the context of so much change, the usual processes and policy around evictions were in a state of flux. Staff had to create individual arrangements regarding arrears repayments and benefit deductions for each tenant, and this all took them considerable time. One Team Leader mentioned the handbook created by the Income Collection team, which detailed the steps staff need to take to tackle arrears, but questioned what else could be done to improve the situation.

Another Team Leader mentioned that, according to Housing Executive procedures, tenants who are four weeks in arrears should be disqualified from being on the transfer list. However, in cases where tenants had applied for Universal Credit or were looking to downsize the Housing Executive had held off taking action against them and they were permitted to remain on the transfer list.

*“We are managing that [evictions] as an organisation with the Department. We have an arrangement with the Department that we, as long as we make agreements with our tenants and as long as we have it as best we can, we know there are some tenants that are seriously financially impacted and their disposable or any income that they have over, we’re trying to make arrangements. If we make an arrangement for them to pay something back to address the arrear, then we are not going to look at taking that any further ... if we hadn’t put that in place then you would be talking about every other tenant going to court every*

*other day, when you look at our accounts at this moment in time – but that isn't happening. How we can sustain that long term I don't know how, but that's the arrangement we have at the moment to sort of help customers out there that they are not; because it's really no fault of their own, because it's assessed, it comes in in arrears, so there are arrears that accumulate naturally from how this money is paid over, but it's not the fault of the tenant.” (Team Leader 2)*

*“... strictly speaking we would be disqualifying people from our transfer list because arrears have risen above a certain level, but because we know there's Universal Credit applied for or on its way, we aren't taking that action. Plus, there's people we would normally disqualify from our waiting list because of arrears or other reasons but because they're looking to move from a three-bed to a one- or two-bed because of the bedroom tax, you know, we're leaving them. We're not disqualifying them; we're leaving them on the list.” (Team Leader 1)*

They did not see how this complicated workload could be sustained in the long term once mitigation ceased and arrears increased dramatically across all tenants affected by the bedroom tax.

*“If we do away with the mitigation payments then that's just going to, I can't see how as an organisation we're going to be able to continue. Honestly, because there are so many people who are being mitigated and, as I say to you, they are – the money is keeping their arrears down. If you add that on to an arrears that we already have, regardless if it's next year or it's going to be in five years' time, regardless of the time, I don't really see how ... what you can do to sort of mitigate against that, for want of a better word. I just don't know how we're going to be able to control the level of arrears, basically. I think it will be totally out of control by then.” (Team Leader 2)*

Both Team Leaders wanted the Department for Communities to act before March to prevent all the difficulties described above. One Team Leader suggested that there needed to be a Discretionary Fund to support tenants unable to pay.

*“I suppose providing there's finance made available to them; there should be some sort of discretionary fund, you know? The likes of the discretionary housing payments or Housing Benefit works well, you know that kind of thing and... but again, a lot of that will be down to the Department as well, not just the Housing Executive.” (Team Leader 1)*

#### **4.20 Stakeholder views on the wider impact of the bedroom tax**

In the longer term one of the key issues commented on by stakeholders as a key barrier to limiting the negative impact of the bedroom tax was the lack of smaller housing stock.

*“It is the poorest people in our society that are going to suffer; there is really limited options for them to move into a smaller property. We have worked out additional fees as about £13 and £25 depending on the category - there is limited properties to move people into, so they are left with little choice but to pay the shortfall.” (Housing association)*

*“I think tenants are going to be forced to pay and stay - we don't have the available stock.” (Housing association)*

*“There isn't enough one bedroom houses - if they are not there people can't transfer to ... [Divided communities] limits choice. People are limited by their own desire to live with their own community, and safety. There are some areas were people just can't go. ... Every day we will hear that people can't go to certain places. It comes up frequently; people become homeless as they can't live in an area.” (Advice Agency)*

They expressed significant concern about how both tenants and housing-related organisations will manage after March 2020.

*“[Going forward] I believe that there will be panic - there will be pressure for transfer for finding certain types of properties, huge demand on advice services, for new build - these are definitely concerns.” (Housing Association)*

Amongst all the stakeholder interviews conducted there was a clear awareness of the significant impact the loss of mitigation will have on their organisations going forward. Both the Housing Executive and housing association staff predicted that it will have a massive impact on their arrears. One housing association commented that they will have arrears in the region of £1 million, another said £1.5 million.

The Advice agency considered that there would be a significant increase in their services related to arrears, such as the advice line for tenants, case work for tenants and training for organisations in relation to this policy area. All organisations mentioned areas of work that they were developing to be ready for the loss of mitigation in April 2020 (Table 4) and all individuals talked clearly about how their roles were changing to take on more elements in relation to the loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and the whole area of welfare reform and Universal Credit. The most detailed discussion regarding preparations was with housing associations; less detail was covered with the Housing Executive and the Advice agency as there was not time to cover these elements in detail given the importance of discussing other areas.

*“A huge amount of our work is on rent arrears, so we can only imagine in the future that our work will increase massively. Poverty and worrying about money has knock-on effects on general health ... we anticipate that need for floating*

*support will massively increase; people need help to come in to them to help with their budgeting.” (Advice Agency)*

**Table 4 – Stakeholders’ comments on work under way or required in preparation for the end of Welfare Supplementary Payment**

<p><b>Housing Executive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Systems and activities to manage and monitor WSP</li> <li>- Need to have better knowledge of housing stock and tenants’ household/family changes</li> <li>- Focus on communication with tenants – preparation of materials / training of staff to ensure providing correct information</li> <li>- Activities (modelling) to consider future financial impact and consider ways to address</li> <li>- Consider impact on allocations policy</li> <li>- Policy on recovery / possession may need to change</li> <li>- Need to review how policies work with one another in relation to allocations</li> </ul> <p><i>“There is disparity in Housing Executive rules and bedroom tax rules: the Housing Executive assess according to their Housing Selection Scheme which is not aligned to bedroom tax allocations policy. Department for Communities conducted a consultation on this in December 2017 but has not yet published its response. NIHE is more generous about overnight access, so lone parent will qualify for two-bedroom, whereas this is not case for bedroom tax.” (Housing Executive)</i></p>
<p><b>External advice agency</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less discussion around organisational preparations</li> <li>- Provision of more training and advice to agencies who need advice</li> <li>- They are often providing advice to tenants as to the specific cost impact of the bedroom tax being applied to their circumstances, so the advice is bespoke to the individual</li> </ul> <p><i>“One thing that we find people know the percentages for how much Housing Benefit may be reduced but they don't have an actual figure and that is what they need. They need to know how much they are actually going to need to pay towards their rent. So doing the calculations with people and talking a bit about budgeting.” (Advice Agency)</i></p>
<p><b>Housing association (1)</b></p>

- Changes to financial systems and activities to manage and monitor WSP (because payments are received differently)
- Operations:
  - Gathering better data across tenant base
  - Access to IT for mobile staff to be able to update tenancy/household information
  - Reduction in patch size to provide managers with more time to monitor accounts
- Focus on communication with tenants regarding WSP (then rolling out wider)
  - Working with tenants who have been receiving WSP: focus on meeting/communicating with them
  - Support tenants to get any exemptions in place e.g. for medical reasons
  - Preparation of communications materials – leaflets, website etc.
  - Training of staff so that they know *what* to communicate

*“We are trying to do a lot of proactive preparatory work: cross-department team set up to deal with it, programme of on-going training for staff, updating information going out to tenants, employing Welfare Advice Officers - we see this as being a major problem for us going forward.” (Housing Association)*

### **Housing association (2)**

- Floating support service to support tenants with budgeting
- Recruitment of additional staff focused on providing support in relation to information on welfare reform / to have discussions: Welfare Officers / Welfare Advice Officers
- Activities to provide support to tenants through other CSR-type projects: Social Supermarket & Advice surgery / Foodbank / Various projects that provide support for budget advice / access to affordable credit / joint projects with organisations in the voluntary and community sector (e.g. Prince’s Trust)
- Increasing budget for legal activities, considering arrears process
- Senior management team considering annual rent increase
- Strategy on fuel poverty and making homes as efficient to heat as possible
- Development strategy: intention to increase the numbers of smaller units, noting that this trend is likely to continue into the future

<b>Year</b>	<b>One bed units</b>	<b>Two bed units</b>
2015/16	2	70
2016/17	12	168
2017/18	30	272

## 5. Personas

- 5.1 Drawing on the information gathered through the qualitative interviews with tenants, we have developed three *personas*. These pull together key trends in the qualitative data and seek to bring them to life based on the people that we have interviewed. The aim of creating personas from research evidence is to help identify the most important needs of tenants, based on their circumstances.

### **Persona 1: Dermott**

Dermott is a single man, aged 50, who due to health issues decided that he needed to move to a smaller property. He could no longer manage the large garden and needed a home that was easier to look after. He also has a new girlfriend and wanted to move closer to her home as he struggles to walk. Occasionally his son will stay with him, with his young grandson.

He has been out of work for some time due to ill health and is used to managing on a tight budget. He managed to find a good house swap with a girl with a young family, through Facebook. He brought his girlfriend to help with signing the papers for the new house, as he can't read or write very well. He moved from a two bed house to another two bed house, but with a much smaller garden and with smaller rooms.

He settled well in his new home, and friends and family donated some curtains and furniture that they no longer wanted. A couple of months after moving in, he got a letter from the Housing Executive saying he was in arrears again. He had some arrears previously but had managed to clear them by borrowing some money from his daughter, so the Housing Executive had given him permission to move to this smaller property.

He arranged to see someone from the Housing Executive in the local office to discuss the arrears – he didn't know the name of his 'housing officer' (patch manager) and didn't really know who to contact. His girlfriend couldn't go with him to the meeting this time, as she was busy at the time the Housing Executive gave him. Dermott is really frustrated that he has lost some sort of payment – which he did not realise was being paid to the Housing Executive on his behalf. He has no recollection of being told that he would be liable to make any sort of payment if he moved and is angry that this was not



explained to him; he would not have moved if he had known, as it means he loses £10 a week which he could be putting towards heating. The Housing Executive say that they told him about it at the time; Dermott says they did not. Going forward, he has decided to have the arrears taken from his benefits as he feels this is the best way to make sure it gets paid.

Dermott just tries to keep his spending to a minimum; he doesn't go out to socialise and keeps only the basics in his larder. He now spreads the payments out for the tax and insurance on his car, and goes without things unless they are really essential.

## **Persona 2: Justine**

Justine is 30 years old and has three young children under four. She was living close to the family of her children's father but relationships have broken down, and she had had problems with the neighbours on the estate, so she decided to move. Also she helps care for her mum during the week, so being closer to her will help make life easier and should mean less spending on petrol.

Justine trained as a hairdresser and is hoping to get back to work once the children are older. She has to manage on her benefits. Her sister helps her out a lot with things for the children; by the time she buys food and nappies and puts some oil in the heating tank there isn't much left. Sometimes her children's father will pay for nappies and things for the children but other times he will not. Today, she has £20 in her purse to last the rest of the week and is hoping that the washing machine isn't going to break as it has been playing up lately.

Justine had heard about the bedroom tax on the news and how it was affecting families in England, so she was pleased to know that she did not have to pay it. She has been on the list two years waiting to move. Recently things had got worse with the neighbours but at last she had managed to find another young mum to swap with who lived in another area. When she signed the forms to move she asked the housing officer whether she would be charged for the bedroom tax when she moved and the housing officer said no. She has settled in to the new area well and is glad that the neighbours don't bother her.

Four months after moving in she received a letter from the Housing Executive saying she owed them money. She couldn't believe it. She is really worried; she hates to be in debt as she knows that she has no savings to help get her out of it and that her budget is really tight. She can't keep borrowing money from her mum and she still had social fund loans to pay back...

Justine managed to get her mum to look after the children and arranged to see someone from the Housing Executive in the local office to discuss the arrears. She is really angry that she now has to pay the bedroom tax. She is angry because she would not have moved had she realised this was going to be the case. She asked the housing office staff if there is anything she can do to not have to pay or if there is any financial help she can get and they tell her that there is not. A short while afterwards two people came to her home to talk to her about her money and how she manages it. She isn't sure if they were from the Housing Executive or not but she hasn't heard from them since.

Now the bedroom tax rent money is taken straight out of her Income Support. She was not told in advance that this was going to happen. The Housing Executive just applied to do it. She never knows how much money she is going to be paid when she receives her benefit every two weeks. She goes to the cashpoint and takes it all out every time it is paid and has to make it last for the next two weeks. Sometimes the amount she is paid is £300, sometimes it is £200, the amount goes up and down so she just can't plan what to do in advance and has to live day to day. She can't afford to take the children swimming or to soft play any more as she doesn't have the spare money for this sort of treat.

### **Persona 3: Eileen**

Eileen's mum passed away and it felt strange to be living in the house without her. Eileen's niece approached her and asked if she might be interested to swap homes, so she checked what her adult daughter thought, as she would need to move too. Eileen went to see the house to swap to and agreed that, whilst it was cramped for her niece's family, with no garden to speak of and two lively children to accommodate, it would be fine for Eileen and easier to manage.

Eileen went to see the Housing Executive and they approved the swap; however, they did tell her that as she was moving and would be under-occupying this three bedroom house, she would have to pay the bedroom tax. Eileen said this would be ok, as she knew her daughter would help out with the cost.

Eileen moved and settled in her new home but her daughter changed her mind and decided to live with friends. Eileen could understand that; it was the right time for her to make a change. However, Eileen is really struggling with her budget; the bedroom tax is £20 a week as she has two spare rooms. This is a lot of money when she is only on Job Seekers Allowance which is about £70 a week. Most often she just doesn't put the heating on, and sometimes she sleeps in the living room as it's the warmest place in the house.

The Housing Executive have been in touch to see what they can do, so now she pays £20 a fortnight towards the bedroom tax. Eileen knows she is in arrears but can't see how it will ever change. She is 55 and looking for work but it's hard. Eileen is worried about her situation and easily gets upset if she dwells on it too much.

- 5.2 These personas are fictional characters created using variations on the types of circumstances experienced by the tenants we interviewed and their recounting of the sequence of events that occurred. It is difficult to unpick the detail of exactly what information was provided to tenants at which point in the process, so these stories simply seek to reflect tenants' perceptions and points of view as we encountered them.

What **is** evident is that – certainly among the first cohort of tenants to lose mitigation in this way – there was confusion and frustration about what had happened and why, and there are very real difficulties for those who now find themselves having to make up a shortfall in their rent.

Even if the vast majority of tenants who stand to be affected by the bedroom tax retain mitigation until the scheduled end of WSP in April 2020, many will then face the same challenge, having to pay some or more of the rent for their home. In Section 6, we conclude by looking at some of the policy and operational issues highlighted by our research and suggest approaches that the Housing Executive (and other social landlords in Northern Ireland) might take in preparing for the planned end of WSP.



## 6. Policy and operational conclusions

6.1 In summary, the research findings indicate that:

- There is very little understanding amongst tenants that mitigation is in place and preventing tenants in Northern Ireland from being affected by the bedroom tax;
- Further to this, tenants are not aware that in certain circumstances they can lose access to their mitigation payments;
- The removal of mitigation at the end of March 2020 may well come as a surprise to tenants and is likely to set in chain a series of events whereby a significant number of tenants will go into arrears and make contact with the Housing Executive to understand what is going on. Amongst our sample the number and size of arrears have risen significantly, and this is a trend noted in all other relevant research that we reviewed;
- The Housing Executive has had an evolving understanding and delivery of the bedroom tax policy which may have further confused some tenants affected so far;
- The Housing Executive and housing associations are aware of, and concerned about, issues associated with the bedroom tax, and are beginning to make provision through extra support for tenants, planning for arrears management etc. However, it is clear that, as March 2020 looms closer, these preparations need to be considerable to offset the challenges that will arise when all tenants lose their Welfare Supplementary Payments.

6.2 Given these broad findings, and in the context of the more detailed information gleaned from the tenants and stakeholders and the evidence from other parts of the UK, we have considered actions and approaches to assist in preparing for the full impact of bedroom tax, assuming that mitigation ends as scheduled in March 2020.

6.3 Fundamentally, the Housing Executive needs to consider how its allocation and income (arrears) policies align with those of SSSC to allow for clarity going forward. It needs to consider how to implement a policy that, without a greater number of small units in its housing stock, is difficult to realise. If most tenants choose to 'stay and (try/fail to) pay' then the Housing Executive and housing associations will have to find the best ways to manage significant arrears, which is likely to require more staffing and resource in itself. On the other hand, if tenants seek to downsize then the Housing Executive must consider how best it can access and allocate any smaller properties available and how this sits with its current allocations policy. It has been recognised in the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations led by DfC that the sharing ages of children in the Housing Selection Scheme need to be aligned with those of SSSC to reduce under-occupation for new tenants.

6.4 In the context of on-going welfare reform and a shifting of the onus back to individuals to manage their own circumstances the Housing Executive needs to support tenants as best it can to grapple with a new way of doing things that is really a culture shock to them. Tenants are used to having their Housing Benefit paid for them and to being passive recipients. We think the change that this represents for tenants cannot be underestimated. In some ways, tenants are being asked to move from an adult/child transactional relationship to an adult/adult relationship in which they take ownership and charge of their own rent accounts. The Housing Executive needs to be committed to supporting this change in dynamic for the long haul, and to developing a new way of working with tenants.

6.5 We suggest that it is of paramount importance that:

- The Housing Executive significantly enhances its communications activities, with some specific and targeted activities and information that highlights these issues to tenants. This may need to take the form of a national advertising campaign to provide the level of cut-through required to reach tenants and dispel the misinformation that has been in place for some time. **Tenants need to know that they will have to pay more for their housing.**
- A communications campaign should seek to find simpler ways to talk about the bedroom tax, helping to evolve a better, clearer, common language which can be shared by tenants and the Housing Executive frontline staff, e.g. “You now need to pay your bedroom tax; you’ve lost the payments that were making up the shortfall”. Fundamentally it needs to move away from ambivalent language such as “you may be affected”.
- Given the pressure that Housing Executive staff are under, it would seem that further additional staffing should be put in place to provide advice and support to tenants to help them to plan for and manage their future, perhaps through a dedicated support telephone line that can take and answer specific queries.
- The Housing Executive finds ways to support tenants to manage financially and to support the development of basic financial literacy skills.
- All frontline Housing Executive staff are fully trained and aware of how to deal with tenants about this issue in the best way – and that they, too, must move away from “adult to child”-based approaches.

6.6 When communicating with tenants, the Housing Executive needs to:

- Communicate as clearly as possible in tenants’ own language, move away from traditional letter-based communications and seek to find the best ways to educate tenants on the issue of the bedroom tax. Housing associations are increasingly using communications based around behavioural



economics approaches to help change behaviour around arrears. This may be an area for further investigation.

- Communicate exact amounts to people rather than an abstract percentage. More work could be done to test and evolve these communications, for example considering whether it is best to communicate a weekly, fortnightly or monthly sum and, indeed, whether it is useful to provide some sense of what that spend is equivalent to, or the difference it might make to what can be bought from one week to the next.

6.7 Based on this research, tenants do not *want* to be in arrears. However, given income levels, it is very hard for a tenant to get *out* of arrears if they fall significantly behind. Therefore, everything must be done in both communications and practical terms to help people as early as possible in the process. A wider communications campaign would lay the ground for people to realise that this could happen to them. Proactive tenant communications and account management is, in our view, the only way to help reduce the levels of arrears post-2020 and we understand there is some evidence from work already undertaken by the Housing Executive to support this conclusion. The Housing Executive needs to look in some detail at the journeys customers go on in accessing their services to identify the most effective points in the process at which to provide focused information.

6.8 Below we have provided some ideas of elements that could be included at appropriate points within the customer journey to help with proactive account management. Ideas and approaches could be trialled with small tenant panels before wider roll-out (please note this list is not exhaustive and each idea would need development to find the best way to approach it):

- Communications campaign in relation to the loss of mitigation;
- Access to a specific waiting list for those wishing to downsize;
- Access to advice organisations that will help consider the best ways to manage money, provide support to access food banks etc.;
- Arrangements to pay/agreements with Department for Communities in relation to payments put in place at sign-up meeting for new property;
- Information at sign-up re where tenants can go if they need help and advice;
- Rent account check when a tenant transfers to a new property;
- Regular account check-ins and support (fortnightly perhaps?);
- Tenant review meetings triggered after first missed rent payment (taking account of the 5 week delay waiting period);
- Regular reminders about the need to pay rent issued via text, with examples of people in similar circumstances who have had to pay and how they manage to do it; and
- Named front line staff to provide help and advice to a tenant

## Literature Review Bibliography

BBC News Online, 'Welfare reform millions set aside by Stormont not spent', 17 January 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-46892952>

Department for Work and Pensions, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research and Ipsos Mori, *Evaluation of Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy Final Report*, December 2015, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/506407/rsrs-evaluation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/506407/rsrs-evaluation.pdf)

Donnelly, K.J., NI Audit Office, *Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland*, 17 January 2019 <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Welfare%20Reform%20Report%202019.pdf>

Gibbons, S., Sánchez-Vidal, M., Silva, O., Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, Discussion Paper No 1537 *The Bedroom Tax*, April 2018 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1537.pdf>

<https://www.gov.scot/policies/social-security/support-with-housing-costs/#discretionary-housing-payment>

Hudson-Sharp, N., Munro-Lott, N., Rolfe, H., Runge, J., National Institute of Economic and Social Research, Equality and Human Rights Commission, March 2018 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-111-cumulative-impact-assessment-evidence-review.pdf>

Irish News 1 December 2018 <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2018/12/01/news/fivefold-surge-in-homes-hit-by-bedroom-tax-in-northern-ireland-1498377/>

NIHE (2018) *Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland: A Scoping Report* [www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/2b5db9a7-6fd8-420c-9265-da85a29d70b0/welfare-reform-ni-a-scoping-report.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf](http://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/2b5db9a7-6fd8-420c-9265-da85a29d70b0/welfare-reform-ni-a-scoping-report.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf)

Wilson, W., Keen, R., House of Commons, Briefing Paper Number 06272: *Under-occupying social housing: Housing Benefit entitlement*, 9 June 2017 [www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06272/SN06272.pdf](http://www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06272/SN06272.pdf)

## Appendix 1: Sample analysis

### 1. Sample response

The Housing Executive provided us with a sample of 100 tenants who had lost Welfare Supplementary Payment. Table 1 notes how the sample responded.

*Table 1 – Sample response*

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. in sample</b>
Agreed to be interviewed and were interviewed	15
Did not contact	31
Contacted but no response e.g. number regularly engaged/straight to voicemail	29
Declined to participate	17
Contacted but said no longer subject to bedroom tax	1
Interested but said to come back to them at a later time	3
Agreed to be interviewed but not there on appointment and did not respond to rescheduling	3
Wrong number	1
Total	100

### 2. Profile of interviews completed compared to sample

Table 2 notes how this sample broke down according to key criteria and the number of qualitative interviews that we achieved accordingly.

*Table 2– Sample and interview breakdown*

	<b>Sample (of 100)</b>	<b>Interviews (of 15)</b>
<b>County</b>		
Antrim	49	8
Down	22	2
Londonderry	17	5
Tyrone	8	-
Armagh	3	-
Fermanagh	1	-
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	59	10
Male	41	5
<b>Age</b>		
<25	3	-
25-30	19	3
31-35	18	1
36-40	11	1
41-45	11	2

46-50	7	2
51-55	10	1
56-60	10	3
61-65	11	2
<b>Number of children (living at home?)</b>		
0	67	9
1	16	3
2	17	3
<b>Number of bedrooms</b>		
1	1	-
2	57	8
3	40	7
4	2	-
<b>Number of households under-occupying by...</b>		
1 bedrooms	83	14
2 bedrooms	11	1
<b>Type of property</b>		
House	59	11
Flat	26	1
Bungalow	12	2
Maisonette	2	
Cottage	1	1
<b>Time since loss of mitigation</b>		
<180 days	8	1
181 to 365 days	12	2
366 to 545 days	36	5
545 to 730 days	33	5
731 days+	11	2

## Appendix 2: Discussion Guides

### Stakeholder discussion guide FINAL – 30 minutes

#### 1. Introduction – 2 mins

- NIHE conducting research to assess the impact on tenants currently affected by the bedroom tax who have lost Welfare Supplementary Payments which mitigated against this. NB. Outline the reason they would lose i.e. made a non-Management Transfer status move which did not reduce their under-occupancy
- RF Associates appointed to conduct desk research, interviews with stakeholders and qualitative research with affected tenants to help NIHE understand this better
- We're interviewing you so we can understand the perspective of key stakeholders (within NIHE / in social housing sector) on this issue
- Objectivity of RF Associates team
- Encouraging honest and open responses, no right or wrong answers
- We take great care in protecting your privacy and the information you provide whilst conducting research with us.
- Unless a longer retention period is required or permitted by law, we will only hold your personal information on our systems for the period necessary to fulfil the purposes outlined in our Privacy Policy on our website or until you request it is deleted
- Purpose of recording the interview – to ensure we capture everything and to share details with NIHE
- Permission to record
- Your responses will be treated as confidential – you will not be personally identified in the reporting

#### **RESEARCHER TO TAILOR QUESTIONS TO STAKEHOLDER GROUPS – some questions are more suited to some stakeholders than others**

#### 2. Your role, perspective on SSSC/bedroom tax and its current impact on your role/organisation – 5 mins

- What is your current role / responsibilities?
- How has the implementation of the bedroom tax affected your job/role so far? PROMPT relevant aspects e.g. additional responsibilities, daily workload, organisational policy and strategy, management responsibilities, communication with tenants etc.
- How do you think it will affect your role/responsibilities in the future?

#### **Filter question to help interviewer understand relevance of asking questions in sections 3,4 and 5:**

- How aware are you about how social housing tenants (Housing Benefit claimants and universal credit claimants) have been affected so far by the introduction of SSSC/bedroom tax?

(FOR THOSE CLOSE TO TENANTS / TENANTS COMMUNICATIONS)

3. Your perspective on affected tenants understanding of SSSC/bedroom tax and its likely impact – 5 mins

- Do you have a sense of how informed tenants are/were about SSSC/bedroom tax before making the decision to move to another property (and thereby losing their WSP)?
- What do you think were their main sources of info about this?
- Do you have a sense of the proportion of tenants who knew they would lose WSP through moving vs those who did not know?
- Is there more that the NIHE could have done to inform tenants about the consequences of moving to another property which they under-occupy? PROBE on what and how

(FOR THOSE CLOSE TO TENANTS / TENANTS COMMUNICATIONS)

4. Views on the impact so far that SSSC/bedroom tax has had on affected tenants – 5-10 mins depending on stakeholder

- Do you have a sense of which type of tenants have been affected by the loss of WSP? E.g. age, location
- How do you think tenants have responded to the loss of WSP?
- How do you think they have managed to cope with reduced payments? E.g. reducing spending, increasing working hours, borrowing money, going into arrears with rent, sub-letting spare room, cash in hand work
- Are you aware of other impacts on tenants? E.g. emotional impact, increased stress, greater social isolation
- How well do you think they understand the policy – how it changes if their circumstances change e.g. a family staying and paying till one of their children needs the room / they have another baby

5. Views on future impact on tenants when over 30,000 social housing tenants will be affected (April 2020) – 5-10 mins depending on stakeholder type

- Do you have a sense of which tenants will be most impacted?
- Extent to which they think tenants will 'stay and pay' vs try to downsize
- Barriers to downsizing – do they feel there are particular geographical areas which will be more challenging than others, PROBE reasons for this e.g. low availability of smaller housing stock, divided communities which limit choice of alternative home

(FOR THOSE MOST CLOSELY INVOLVED IN POLICY / PRACTICAL DELIVERY OF SSSC especially Patch Managers)

6. Response of NIHE and social housing providers in NI to end of WSP in April 2020 – 10-20 mins depending on stakeholder type

- How do you think the full implementation of SSSC/bedroom tax will affect your organisation?
- What do you think will be the biggest impact and why?
- Are there any changes that your organisation plans to make or needs to make to manage this impact effectively?
  - PROMPT: changes to operational practices e.g. increasing the level of communication with tenants, increasing advice and support, greater



digitalisation of services, changes to staff base/structure/skills, more proactive approach to income collection, 'early intervention' when arrears start to accrue

- PROMPT: changes to housing stock e.g. reclassifying the number of bedrooms in stock or physically altering housing stock so they properties have fewer bedrooms
  - PROMPT: changes allocations policy e.g. increasing priority to downsizers
  - PROMPT: changes to development policy around size of homes developed going forward
- Any final thoughts or views that you feel it is important to mention?
7. Thank you for your time today – 1 minute
- We will be reporting to the NIHE later in April

## Tenants Discussion Guide

For researcher - Reminder of project objectives:

- To assess the impact on tenants of losing Welfare Supplementary Payments;
- To assess if tenants are able to pay the shortfall in rent;
- Gain an understanding of how tenants are meeting/ not meeting any shortfall in eligible rent;
- To gain a better understanding of what longer term plans tenants have to meet the shortfall in their rent;
- To assess the quality of information provided by the Housing Executive prior to loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment and reasons for moving;
- Any support needs identified after losing Welfare Supplementary Payment

Notes	Guide Sections	Guide Timings
1. Introductions and background	Orientates participant and prepares them to take part in the depth interview.	5 mins
2. Knowledge and awareness of the bedroom tax	Here we review the participant's knowledge and awareness of the bedroom tax, and their journey to losing WSP, and how informed they have been throughout the whole process.	20 mins
3. Impact on household and ways addressing shortfall	Here we investigate first the participants general financial context and then how the loss of WSP has impacted on the participant's financial situation, as well as the impact on the household outside of finances, any other impacts or perceived impacts, for example, with regard to children in the household. Also understanding how the household is dealing with the loss of WSP, what they are doing to meet or not meet the shortfall – and how this might develop in the future.	30 mins
4. Conclusion and final thoughts	Allows time for the participant to offer some concluding thoughts on what would have improved their experience and the interviewer to close the interview.	5 mins
Total		60 mins

As researchers we will evolve our language through the interviews – tenants may not be so clear on terms such as mitigation, welfare supplementary payment, social size sector criteria etc. – We will be conscious of this as we discuss the themes with them.

## Impact of the Social Size Sector Criteria and loss of WSP

### 1. Introduction and background (5 mins)

- Thank participant for taking part
  - Introduce self, RF Associates – independent research organisation commissioned by NIHE
  - Explain aims of project – to understand how the loss of WSP is affecting people so that the staff at NIHE can better understand the situation of tenants who have lost WSP
  - Explain confidentiality and Market Research Society guidelines. Reassure that all responses are anonymous and that information about individuals will not be passed on to anyone, including back to NIHE, or any other Government Department.
  - Reassure that any current or future benefits claims will not be affected in any way
  - Get permission to digitally record – transcribe for quotes, no detailed attribution and not passed on to NIHE
1. I'd just like to check – are you still affected by the removal of Welfare supplementary payment? (i.e. has the amount of Housing Benefit you receive reduced?)
  2. I'd like to start by learning a little bit about you. Can you tell me a bit about you and your household?  
PROBE: Who do you live with? How long have you lived here? How many are adults/children? How old are your children?
  3. (Briefly) Are you working at the moment? What kind of work do you do?  
IF NOT WORKING, PROBE FOR THEIR WORK STATUS e.g. unemployed, looking after the home or their children, long-term sick/disabled, a carer, retired  
IF WORKING: Can you tell me a little more about your work? What kind of hours do you work?
  4. Could you tell me about your home? How long have you lived here? Why did you choose to move here?
  5. How many bedrooms does the house have? Who lives in each room? Does anyone share a bedroom?

### 2. Knowledge and awareness of the bedroom tax (20 mins)

6. When and how did you first hear about the bedroom tax? What have been your main sources of information about it?

7. Did you understand what it might mean for you when you first heard about it?
8. Do you know why you have lost Welfare Supplementary Payment/ are receiving less Housing Benefit/have to pay extra towards your rent?
9. Can you please talk me through the process of losing Welfare Supplementary Payment? When did you first hear about it? Allow the participant to explain how they lost WSP – and then take them back and prompt on detail in relation to any discernible stages including the first time they knew how much they need to pay extra and how they worked out how to make this payment. Researcher to draw out the process on paper if that aids discussion

PROBE:

10. What information were you provided with at each stage? PROBE (depending on what NIHE sent them according to sample info: notification letter, discussion with Patch Manager/housing officer, signing form at meeting with Patch Manager, first time they received a letter about rent owing) Who provided you with that information? How well did you understand what it meant for you? And what you were meant to do as a result?
11. Did you talk to anyone about losing WSP? Did you speak to an external organisation outside of the Housing Executive? If went to external organisation - Was the advice / support provided helpful or otherwise?
12. Was any other support or advice offered to you? Did you take it up? If yes, why? If not, why not? Who provided this support? And how did you find it?
13. Were you offered the chance to talk through the impact on your finances with the Patch Manager/housing officer? (Financial Capability Assessment)
14. FOR THOSE WHO WE KNOW DID COMPLETE A FCA: How helpful did you find this? Did it help you understand the impact of moving home on your finances?
15. How do you actually pay the additional rent money? PROBE Pay Point, DD. How easy is this to do?
16. If you were aware that you would lose WSP why did you move?
17. If you had understood things in more detail would you still have moved home?
18. What would have helped you understand this better and at what stage would you have liked to know about it?

19. At the time of losing WSP how did you consider that you would manage any shortfall in rent? Were you able to think about this in any detail? Did you think about doing anything specific as a result? How aware were you of what it would mean for your finances?

### 3. Impact on household and ways addressing shortfall (30 minutes)

20. So we want to understand how the loss of WSP payment / mitigation / reduction in Housing Benefit impacted on your finances – would you mind just first talking about your finances in general.

What is the main type of money coming into the house?

Wages

Benefits

21. At the moment, how easy or difficult do you find it to manage your incomings and outgoings? Can you talk me through how you manage money?

22. Have you ever been behind on your rent before losing WSP payment / mitigation / reduction in Housing Benefit? (CHECK SAMPLE RE THIS INFO IN ADVANCE)

23. Do you have rent arrears at the moment? (CHECK SAMPLE RE THIS INFO IN ADVANCE)

If so are these increasing or decreasing.

If they are decreasing how have you managed to do this?

If they are increasing - Do you think this situation will be temporary, or go on for a while? Can you explain why? What do you think will happen next?

24. How has the loss of WSP payment / mitigation / reduction in Housing Benefit changed things for you? Have you changed the kinds of things that you spend money on? Are there areas that you spend more/less on? Why is this?

25. Did you have any points at which you decided not to pay the extra? What were your reasons for this?

26. How has loss of WSP changed your finances and the way you manage them? And what changes has it had on your household?

27. Have you made any plans to deal with the changes?

IF YES: What plans have you made? Why?

What are you doing differently as a result? Why?

IF NO: Is there a reason you haven't made plans?

PROBE FULLY WHERE POSSIBLE ON WHAT THEY INTEND TO DO

28. Have you made any other changes because of the loss of WSP?  
e.g. Claiming benefits that you were entitled to but were not claiming before?  
Have you taken a lodger or has another family member or friend come to live with you since the RSRS came in?  
Cutting back? – on food, heating, activities  
Borrowing? E.g. sought help from family and friends on paying the rent  
Accruing arrears?  
Increasing debts?  
Increasing income through increasing hours at work?  
Changing job?
29. What else would you do / have you done to be able to pay the shortfall since losing WSP?
30. Generally speaking, what do you think has changed for you since you lost WSP?
31. Do you think there have been any effects on yourself / members of your family?  
IF IN A COUPLE: What about your partner?  
IF PARTICIPANT HAS CHILDREN: What about your children?
- PROBE  
Impact of levels of concern / worrying about money  
Impact on general well being  
Stopped you doing anything
32. Has the loss of WSP affected you in any other way?
33. What about the future? Do you have any particular plans for the future re how you will make up the shortfall? Are you concerned about how you will pay this in the future?
- Claiming benefits that you were entitled to but were not claiming before?  
Have you taken a lodger or has another family member or friend come to live with you since the RSRS came in?  
Cutting back? – on food, heating, activities  
Borrowing? E.g. sought help from family and friends on paying the rent  
Accruing arrears?  
Increasing debts?  
Increasing income through increasing hours at work?  
Changing job?



34. If you have issues paying the shortfall in the future – where will you go for help? What would you do?

35. Will you seek advice and support going to consider these elements in the future? Who would you seek this from?

#### 4. Conclusion and final thoughts (5 minutes)

36. In everything that we have discussed what would have helped to ensure that you were better able to deal with the loss of WSP?

PROBE

More specific information

More time

Someone to talk to

37. Is there anything else that you would like to say that we haven't covered?

Thank participant for taking part, and give them their incentive plus an information sheet which thanks them for taking part and gives them the name and number of their Welfare Support Champion if they wish to talk through anything further with them as a result of this interview

## Patch Manager discussion guide FINAL – 45 minutes

1. Introduction – 2 mins
  - NIHE conducting research to assess the impact on tenants currently affected by the bedroom tax who have lost Welfare Supplementary Payments which mitigated against this.
  - RF Associates appointed to conduct desk research, interviews with stakeholders, staff and affected tenants to help NIHE understand this better
  - We're interviewing you so we can understand the perspective of patch managers on this issue
  - Objectivity of RF Associates team
  - Encouraging honest and open responses, no right or wrong answers
  - We take great care in protecting your privacy and the information you provide whilst conducting research with us.
  - Unless a longer retention period is required or permitted by law, we will only hold your personal information on our systems for the period necessary to fulfil the purposes outlined in our Privacy Policy on our website or until you request it is deleted
  - Purpose of recording the interview – to ensure we capture everything and to share details with NIHE
  - Permission to record
  - Your responses will be treated as confidential – you will not be personally identified in the reporting
  
2. Understanding of and perspective on SSSC/bedroom tax and its current impact on your role/organisation – 10 mins
  - When did you first hear about the bedroom tax?
  - How well do you think you have understood the policy since it was introduced?
  - How well do you think you have understood the removal of WSP since this was introduced?
  - What training have you had on removal of WSP? / How informed do you feel about it?
  - Do you feel able to talk to tenants about it and explain it? Are there any particular devices / forms that you use to help explain it?
  - Are there any particular elements that you find complicated to explain?
  - How has the implementation of the bedroom tax affected your job/role so far? PROMPT relevant aspects e.g. additional responsibilities, daily workload, organisational policy and strategy, management responsibilities, communication with tenants etc.
  - How do you think it will affect your role/responsibilities in the future?
  
3. Your perspective on affected tenants understanding of SSSC/bedroom tax and its likely impact – 5 mins
  - Do you think tenants know anything about the bedroom tax?
  - Do you have a sense of how informed tenants are/were about SSSC/bedroom tax before making the decision to move to another property (and thereby losing their WSP)?

- What do you think were their main sources of info about this for tenants?
  - Do you have a sense of the proportion of tenants who knew they would lose WSP through moving vs those who did not know?
  - Is there more that the NIHE could have done / be doing to inform tenants about the consequences of moving to another property which they under-occupy? PROBE on what and how
4. Views on the impact so far that SSSC/bedroom tax has had on affected tenants – 10 mins
- Do you have a sense of which type of tenants have been affected by the loss of WSP? E.g. age, location
  - How do you think tenants have responded to the loss of WSP?
  - How do you think they have managed to cope with reduced payments? E.g. reducing spending, increasing working hours, borrowing money, going into arrears with rent, sub-letting spare room, cash in hand work
  - Are you aware of other impacts on tenants? E.g. emotional impact, increased stress, greater social isolation
  - How well do you think they understand the policy – how it changes if their circumstances change e.g. a family staying and paying till one of their children needs the room / they have another baby
5. Views on future impact on tenants when over 30,000 social housing tenants will be affected (April 2020) – 10 mins
- Do you have a sense of which tenants will be most impacted?
  - Extent to which they think tenants will 'stay and pay' vs try to downsize
  - Barriers to downsizing – do they feel there are particular geographical areas which will be more challenging than others, PROBE reasons for this e.g. low availability of smaller housing stock, divided communities which limit choice of alternative home
6. Response of NIHE to end of WSP in April 2020 – 10 mins
- How do you think the full implementation of SSSC/bedroom tax will affect your work?
  - What do you think will be the biggest impact and why?
  - Are there any changes that the NIHE plans to make or needs to make to manage this impact effectively?
    - PROMPT: changes to operational practices e.g. increasing the level of communication with tenants, increasing advice and support, greater digitalisation of services, changes to staff base/structure/skills, more proactive approach to income collection, 'early intervention' when arrears start to accrue
    - PROMPT: changes to housing stock e.g. reclassifying the number of bedrooms in stock or physically altering housing stock so they properties have fewer bedrooms
    - PROMPT: changes allocations policy e.g. increasing priority to downsizers
    - PROMPT: changes to development policy around size of homes developed going forward

- Any final thoughts or views that you feel it is important to mention?
7. Thank you for your time today – 1 mins
- We will be reporting to the NIHE later in April

## Appendix 3: Letter providing notification of loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment

Claimant name  
Claimant address line 1  
Claimant address line 2  
Claimant address line 3  
Claimant address line 4  
Postcode

Supplementary Payments Team  
CastleCourt  
Royal Avenue  
Belfast  
BT1 1HR  
Telephone: 0300 123 3382  
Textphone: 0300 123 3383

Reference: NINO  
Date

Dear (a) (b)

### **Supplementary payment**

You are currently getting a supplementary payment because, following the introduction of Social Sector Size Criteria, your Housing Benefit was reduced.

We have reviewed these payments as there has been a change in your circumstances and have decided that you are no longer entitled to this supplementary payment.

The final payment will be issued on (c).

### **If we pay too much money**

If we have paid you or your landlord more money than you are entitled to, the Department has the right to take back any money that has been overpaid.

If this happens we will write again before we take any money back.

### **What to do next**

If you disagree with the decision we have made you can ask for the decision to be reviewed. You can do this by either writing to us or phoning us but you must do this within one month of the date of this letter.

DLSP004 SSSC

02/17

### **Help and advice**

Further information on Welfare Changes can be found at [www.nidirect.gov.uk/welfarechanges](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/welfarechanges). If you have any further queries you can phone or write to us using the contact details at the top of the front page of this letter.

Our lines are open:  
Monday to Friday: 8:00am to 6:00pm  
Except for public and bank holidays.

Yours sincerely

L Martin  
Manager

- (a) links to claimant title on SPS
- (b) links to claimant surname on SPS
- (c) links to date of final payment on SPS

SAMPLE



# Appendix 4: Form: Permanent Loss of Welfare Supplementary Payment

Appendix 2

## Permanent Loss of Social Sector Size Criteria Welfare Supplementary Payment Entitlement Form

Property Address	Moving from:	Moving to:
No. of Bedrooms in Property		
Property Rent & Rates Charges		
Household Members (DOB & Relationship)	Lead Tenant: ..... Additional Household members: ..... ..... .....	
Anticipated No. of Bedrooms allowed for HB / UC (inc. additional bedrooms)		
Anticipated Shortfall		
<p><b>Note:</b> If you move to the above property you are likely to <b>permanently lose entitlement</b> to your Social Sector Size Criteria Welfare Supplementary Payment. This is due to the following circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are currently in receipt of a Social Sector Size Criteria Welfare Supplementary Payment; and</li> <li>• You are moving as a non-management transfer; and</li> <li>• You are not reducing your number of bedrooms under-occupied according to Housing Benefit / Universal Credit rules.</li> </ul> <p>More information on these changes is outlined overleaf. If you are unsure of how you may be affected you should discuss this further with your housing officer before proceeding.</p> <p><b>DECLARATIONS</b></p> <p>I understand that based on the information I have provided in relation to my circumstances that I am likely to permanently lose entitlement to my Social Sector Size Criteria Welfare Supplementary Payment.</p> <p>Whilst the Housing Executive has taken reasonable steps to ensure that advice provided to me is accurate I understand that this advice is for information purposes only and that I may seek further independent advice as outlined overleaf as to how I may be impacted.</p> <p>I understand that it is my responsibility to pay any shortfall in rent to my landlord.</p> <p>Signed.....Date.....</p> <p>Signed.....Date.....</p> <p>Name of Officer (PRINT).....Date.....</p>		

## Appendix 5: Copy of form used by Housing Association

DATE
ADDRESS
Re:
I/We confirm that I/We have been made aware of the recent changes to the welfare system including the bedroom tax and benefit cap rules.
It has been explained to me that as I may be deemed to be under occupying at my new address that I may lose any mitigation which I have previously been receiving. INSERT IF ANY OTHER CONDITIONS MAY APPLY.
I understand that if I am affected by these changes and my housing costs are not covered then I will be liable for the shortfall in these.
Signed: _____
Dated: _____
Witnessed: _____