

# Swindon Tenants Campaign Group

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## Campaign Group News October 2012

### Keep secure tenancies for *all* tenants, reject 'fixed term' tenancies

Council tenants have a 'secure tenancy'. We know that if we pay the rent and don't behave in an anti-social way, we have no fear of being thrown out of our homes. However, the government has given Councils the ability to introduce 'flexible tenancies' for new tenants. Swindon Council is currently considering introducing a 'fixed term' of five years. Towards the end of the five years they would have to decide whether to renew the tenancy or 'ask' the tenant to leave; that is to **evict them even if they had done nothing wrong.**

The Council would have to set the criteria for deciding whether to end a tenancy or renew it. Tenants would be means tested. If the Council considered a tenant to be earning 'too much' to justify keeping the tenancy then they would be forced to leave and either move into more expensive private rented accommodation, or take out a mortgage, *if* they could get one. **So the Council could evict tenants who have done nothing wrong, except maybe get a better paid job or a promotion.** Even Swindon Council has admitted 'fixed term' tenancies would create 'anxiety' for such tenants who would have an uncertain future. The inevitable result of introducing 'fixed term' tenancies is that only poor or vulnerable people would be allowed Council accommodation.

All the tenant organisations in Swindon are opposed to 'fixed term' tenancies. **The Council should listen to its tenants and decide not to introduce them.**

#### Existing tenants beware

Whilst existing tenants will keep their 'secure tenancy', under a government proposal which has just been consulted on – '**Pay to Stay**' – *all* tenants, without exception, would be forced to undergo a means test. '**Pay to stay**' is supposed to be directed at 'high earners'; individuals or the two highest earners whose combined income reached a certain level. The government appears to favour £60,000 a year. Whilst this sounds a lot to most of us, once a threshold has been introduced *it can easily be lowered.* **In fact the 'localism' powers already give Councils the right to set their own threshold.** For instance Barnet Council has set theirs at £32,580.

Only tenants who receive Housing Benefit are means tested at the moment. But if 'pay to stay' was introduced then in order to find the tiny number of households that have an income of above £60,000 ***all those tenants who don't receive HB and pay full rent would be subject to a means test.*** The government is proposing to change the law so that all tenants would have to disclose their finances to their Council. Some Councils have already decided to take account of savings when it comes to a decision as to whether or not to renew or end a fixed term tenancy.

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***"We need more Council housing, not means tested housing."***

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According to the government's own estimate there could be as few as 12,000 households that earn this level of income out of 3.8 million Council and Housing Association homes in England. Anybody found to earn above the threshold would have to pay up to double the rent they do now. However, the cost of means testing all tenants will have to be paid for out of *our rent*. The amount of extra rent collected would be tiny, probably less than the cost of means testing all tenants. Any household faced with a big increase in their rent is likely to take up the 'right to buy' since the big reductions the government is giving *would mean a mortgage would be cheaper than the higher rent.* So the chances are we will lose more Council homes, adding to the shortage of homes available.

**Swindon Tenants Campaign Group** is opposed to turning Council housing into means tested housing. We believe **all** tenants, existing and future ones, should have a 'secure tenancy'. Council housing is not charity. It was first built because private builders were not interested in building homes for working people. Housing cannot be left to 'the market'. The only way to deal with the housing crisis is to start building Council homes on a big scale again. **We need more Council**

housing not means tested housing.

### What can you do?

Swindon Council *does not have to introduce fixed term tenancies. We are, therefore, calling on the Council to reject them and maintain 'secure tenancies' for all tenants.* You can support this call by emailing the Councillor responsible for Housing at [rholland@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:rholland@swindon.gov.uk) or write to him care of the Civic Offices, Euclid St, Swindon.

*If Swindon Council proposes to introduce 'fixed term' tenancies we need to press our local Councillors to vote against them.*

## The 'bedroom tax' - penalising the poor for the housing shortage

**A**nother government policy being introduced, in April of next year, is the so-called 'bedroom tax'. **It will apply only to people of working age.**

Anybody of working age receiving Housing Benefit (HB) and considered to be 'under-occupying' their home will have their HB cut by 14% if they have one 'spare' bedroom, or 25% if they have two or more 'spare' bedrooms. This idea is supposed to make 'better use' of the available homes. It's designed to put financial pressure on already poor tenants to 'downsize' to smaller accommodation. **However, there is simply not enough accommodation of the 'right' size for them to be moved into even if they want to.**

Swindon Council estimates that there are 775 households that would 'need' to be moved into one bedroom homes if they were to avoid facing an HB cut. However, last year the Council only gave out 104 tenancies for one bedroom homes. So if all these people were to be transferred into one bedroom properties **it would take the best part of 8 years, and that's only if all the people on the housing waiting list were not given any tenancies.** So those on the list would have to wait years longer.

Not only is this policy callous and inhuman, it cannot work because of the mismatch between the homes available and the make-up of the households.

The 'bedroom standard' on which this policy is based takes no account of the usual life cycle. Couples only 'qualify' for one bedroom. What is the point of putting a young couple into one bedroom when as soon as the first child arrives they will have to be found a two bed property (if there are any available), and then possibly a 3 bed one when more children are born? And when their children leave home, if they receive HB, they will be expected move to a one bed property or be penalised.

**Yet even if they ask for a move but there is no alternative property available they will still have**

their benefit cut.

### Call for the bedroom tax to be withdrawn

Since the 'bedroom tax' does not come in until April of next year there is still time to campaign against it. Email Swindon's MP's demanding that they speak out against the injustice of this policy.

Email [robert.buckland.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:robert.buckland.mp@parliament.uk)

Email [justin.tomlinson.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:justin.tomlinson.mp@parliament.uk)

or write to 1 Milton Rd, Swindon SN1 5JE

## Council Tax Benefit cuts: Penalising the poor - again

**O**n the very day, next April, when the rich will receive a tax cut, roughly 9,000 people in Swindon who receive Council Tax Benefit (CTB) will have theirs cut, if the Council's proposals are accepted. The government is ending CTB and giving each Council a grant, *only they will cut it by 10%*. However, because the government has told Councils to exclude pensioners from having to pay extra, others who receive CTB would have to pay at least 20% of their Council tax. The Council has published some examples of how different people will be affected. In cash terms the examples show an increase from £3.09 a week to £11.19.

For people on the breadline any cut, under current economic conditions, is hard to take. In the case of some tenants who will have to pay up to £21 a week because they are said to be 'under-occupying', the extra for Council Tax will be on top of this. We know that some people on Job Seekers Allowance of £71 a week might have to pay £25 out of this pittance. How are they supposed to survive?

Swindon Council is considering excluding some tenants from being charged. However, the more people who are excluded then the greater the increase that those who have to pay to cover the cut will face.

**Swindon Tenants Campaign Group** is calling on the Council to *demand the government to reinstate the 10% cut. If they don't then the Council should find the money from elsewhere rather than penalising people who are already poor.*

Even a Tory Council in David Cameron's constituency has spoken out against this cut and is refusing to pass it on to those who receive CTB. Why can't Swindon Council's ruling Tory group do the same?

**To express your opposition to the cut, and to demand that the Council opposes it,** email [benefitsclient@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:benefitsclient@swindon.gov.uk) or write to: **Head of Revenues and Benefits, Swindon Borough Council, Civic Offices, Euclid St, Swindon SN1 2JH**

The consultation on the CTB cut will finish on November 9<sup>th</sup>.