



Scotland United Against the Bedroom Tax – action and opportunities

STUC held its Scotland Against the Bedroom Tax Conference on the 29th June this year.

The event brought together a great number of organisations and activists who are committed to fighting the Bedroom Tax including local anti-cuts campaign groups, new groups formed to oppose the bedroom tax, disability campaign groups, trade unions and many, many, more.

It was never STUC's intention to form a new organisation. Activists are finding many, many of ways to fight the Bedroom Tax, through their unions and political parties; through the Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation; through the No2Bedroom Tax campaign; through tenants' organisations, housing associations and housing campaign groups; and through issue based equality campaign organisations. An even wider range of voluntary sector organisations are lobbying against the Bedroom Tax and are deeply involved in actions to mitigate its worst effects.

By bringing together such a diverse set of groups and individuals it was guaranteed that different views and campaign strategies would emerge. There are some things on which people do not agree **but there is a great deal on which we can work together.**

KEY MESSAGE: WE SHOULD FOCUS ON ACTIVITY AND CAMPAIGNING. When an event is organised whether a lobby, a demonstration, local petitioning, public meeting an anti-eviction action, all those who are able to support it should do so.

Consigning the Bedroom Tax to the dustbin of history

Everyone at the conference agreed that, whatever else we do, ensuring that the Bedroom Tax is defeated is a shared aim. This could happen by winning a complete UK Government climb down. Were Scotland to become independent or gain additional powers through devolution, it could also scrap the tax.

Is a climb down possible? As the effects and failures of the Bedroom Tax policy become clear, pressure on the Government will grow. The LibDems are already uncomfortable with this policy and as the election comes closer their MPs will begin to fear for their seats. As well as campaigning for full repeal, we can campaign for an increase in the number of exemptions. For example, separated parents, all disabled people, all those for whom a suitable alternative social housing offer is not made. By increasing the number of exemptions, the Bedroom Tax could effectively be amended out of existence.

Actions: **Lobby your MP** and other elected representatives. A short toolkit for this is attached at the end of this briefing.

March and Rally at Liberal Democrat Conference Saturday 14th September! The Liberal Democrat conference will be in Glasgow from 14th September. On 16th September they will debate a motion critical of the Bedroom Tax. A leaflet for the demonstration is attached to this briefing. You can visit the website at www.binthebedroomtax.net.

March and Rally at Tory Party Conference Sunday 29th September. Trade unionists, and health and community campaigners will converge on Tory Party conference on 29th September. Although the demonstration is not explicitly about the Bedroom Tax, Scotland's Trade Unions as well as members of the Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation plan to join the throng. Details of transport can be accessed via the STUC 'Better Way' campaign site. www.thereisabetterway.org/

Link up with campaigning organisations south of the border.

The conference heard from the No2Bedroom Tax Campaign and Unite the union about how union community organising and the use of social media can massively boost UK-wide co-operation. Initiatives such as **Unite Community Membership** provide a way in which local activities can be networked and supported across the country. For more details of Unite Community Membership contact Jack Ferguson jack.ferguson@unitetheunion.org

For example. Campaign groups across the UK are organising **Sleep overs against the Bedroom Tax on 24th August**. Details can be found on Facebook and at <https://www.facebook.com/MassSleepover>

Pressuring the Labour Party

There was a great deal of anger at the conference over Labour's failure to commit to repealing the Bedroom Tax. If the Labour Party is in power after the next election it will have the power to repeal the Bedroom Tax. We don't want to wait until 2015, but it is vital that Labour commits to doing this. At the moment Labour's position is that it opposes the Bedroom Tax, but will not make any spending commitments at this stage. The amount of money the Bedroom Tax 'saves' is relatively small, so this is a small spending commitment but a big moral issue.

Action: **Lobby your MP** and other elected representatives. A short toolkit for this is attached at the end of this briefing.

Pressuring the SNP

If Scotland chooses independence, the SNP has committed to repealing the Bedroom Tax, the Scottish Green Party is similarly committed. But there was a great deal of anger that more was not being done by the Scottish Parliament on this issue.

Actions: When you lobby your SNP/Green MSP recognise that this is the case (it's always good to thank someone when they do something right!) But stress that independence is not guaranteed and that we can't wait for 2016. **Ask the SNP what they are prepared to do now** (more details in the next section).

Mitigating the impact of the Bedroom Tax

The conference discussed the various ways in which the Bedroom Tax can be mitigated through:

- Reducing the number of people being affected through consistently applied and well-funded use of Discretionary Housing Payments.
- Ensuring that all those who are eligible achieve exemptions
- Introducing no evictions policies
- Funding no evictions policies

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

Different councils are applying different policies on DHP and the funding differs massively from area to area. This was examined in detail in the STUC's evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee which can be viewed here. There is a DHP postcode lottery which must end.

Action: Lobby your MSP to ensure the Scottish Government makes monies available to local authorities so that they can make full use of DHP. This could cut in half the number of people falling into debt. A short toolkit for this is attached at the end of this briefing. The Scottish Government will begin its budget process in early September.

Action: Lobby your councillor to ensure that Discretionary Housing payments are accessible, transparent, properly funded and consistently applied.

Exemptions

As part of its Austerity Uncovered tour, STUC met with a number of folk who would clearly qualify for an exemption but do not currently receive one. All campaigning organisations will come into contact with such people and it is vital that they have access to the best possible advice.

Action: STUC will publish a list of organisations which can help on the 'Better Way' website www.thereisabetterway.org

Scotland-wide No Evictions policies

Most people at the conference were in favour of a Scotland-wide ban on evictions for Bedroom Tax arrears. This is the position advanced by Govan Law Centre. The Scottish Government does not currently support this position and a petition was considered by the Scottish Parliament Petitions Committee and will now be debated at the Welfare Reform Committee. More details can be seen here.

Shelter Scotland supports this position but also points out that funding is needed to ensure that if No Evictions policies are adopted, housing providers do not go bust or be forced to cut repairs or staff. It calls for up to £50 million to be made available by the Scottish Government for this purpose.

Action: Lobby your MSP

Local No-Evictions policies

The conference generally supported the adoption by councils of no evictions policies for Bedroom Tax. It was noted that only some councils have adopted this position and that this strategy poses particular problems for smaller housing associations. Many participants believed that the No Evictions policies of councils were not in fact complete no evictions policies and that in any case, they were only in place for the first year.

Action: Lobby your councillor.

Supporting local communities, building local groups

The conference heard from a range of local groups who are building opposition to the Bedroom Tax and supporting their local communities. Some are part of larger local networks opposing other benefit and services cuts and some have been created specifically around the Bedroom Tax. There are also a range of housing organisations which are active in their community. Some groups have come together to form larger local alliances, and many have affiliated to the All Scotland Anti-Bedroom Tax federation.

Some groups have been successful in forging local alliances, with unions and with other community campaigners. Many believed that there was much more to be achieved through working together at local level. Many local groups have pledged to oppose evictions through peaceful direct action if necessary.

- Regular petitioning in the local area can help to build a strong group with well-attended meetings.
- Groups were very positive about the use of music, appearances at events by Citizen Smart and the sale of CDs to boost campaign funds.
- Lobbying all local politicians through email, telephone and attending surgeries is important. A particularly important action is to call on elected representatives to speak at meetings so that they can be held to account.
- Resources are tight for the production of leaflets and the hiring of rooms for meetings. Local Trades Union Councils and individual trade union branches can work more closely with communities to pool resources as well as campaigning together.

Actions:

- On September 7th a representative of local groups will be invited to a session of the STUC's Trades Union Council conference in order to build relationships between TUCs and local groups.
- STUC will circulate to all its affiliated unions, lists of local contacts for groups in order that contact can be made between local branches and Bedroom Tax campaigns.
- STUC has produced the attached guide for lobbying elected representatives which includes a method for sharing responses with groups and assisting groups in organising meetings with elected representatives if help is needed.
- For more details of Unite Community Membership contact Jack Ferguson jack.ferguson@unitetheunion.org

Forthcoming events in the Parliaments

Scottish Budget

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance John Swinney will announce his Budget during September. This is the start of a process which will set Scottish spending (including local authority spending limit) for 2014-2015.

Scottish Affairs Committee

The Scottish Affairs Select Committee is conducting an inquiry into the Bedroom Tax and may hold local hearings in Scotland. For more details go to: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/scottish-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/bedroom-tax/>

LOBBYING TOOLKIT



It is vital that local groups, trades councils and any individual pressures local politicians. This can be done by email, phone, or best of all a face to face meeting. Many groups will already have done this. But if some of the questions below are asked and the answers recorded, we can build up a picture of what politicians really think and use this to put pressure on all political parties. Send in the replies you receive to info@stuc.org.uk

Why not contact all of your local representatives and ask them to attend a meeting together. If any of them refuse, why not contact the STUC and see if we can help persuade them! You can email STUC at info@stuc.org.uk if you want to request assistance.

Questions for MPs

- Does your party oppose the Bedroom Tax?
- If so is it pledged to repeal the legislation in the future?
- Do you support your party's view on this?
- Do you believe that there should be additional exemptions written into the legislation?

Examples include; all disabled people ; all separated parents where the 'spare' room is for the use of a child; all people who do not receive an offer of suitable alternative social housing etc

Questions for MSPs

- Do your party oppose the Bedroom Tax
- Do you support that position?
- Do you support the position put forward by Govan Law Centre that the law should be changed so that there can be no evictions for Bedroom Tax arrears?
- Do you support the position put forward by Shelter Scotland that there should be up to £50 million made available by the Scottish Government to help tackle the impact of the Bedroom Tax?
- Do you support the position also put forward by Shelter Scotland that the Scottish Government should call an emergency summit of social landlords?
- Do you support the position put forward by the STUC and others that the Scottish Government should make £25 million available to local authorities so that they can maximise the use of Discretionary Housing Payments?

Questions for councillors

- Does your council have a no evictions policy?
- Do you support that position?
- If so, in what circumstances might someone with the Bedroom Tax still be evicted?
- Does your council make full use of its capacity to supplement Discretionary Housing Payments by an extra 150%?
- Do you support that position?
- Do you believe the Scottish Government should make additional funds available to councils to enable them to supplement Discretionary Housing Payments



Rally and March

to the
**Liberal Democrat
Conference at
SECC in Glasgow**

Saturday 14th September 2013

Meet 12 noon at Glasgow Green • Rally at SECC

'tenant led, workers supported rally'

For further details see: www.binthebedroomtax.net

Supported by:



Glasgow and West of Scotland
Forum of Housing Associations