

ASK THE ADVISER

23) HOUSING - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

In the late 1950's (when I was extremely young!) my father told me to shake hands with a caller - a Highland Gentleman in his 100th year – and, when I was older, explained that the reason was that the visitor remembered as a child his parents discussing the forcible eviction of their families from their land and the houses being burned, and he wanted me to meet him so that I would understand just how recent the Highland Clearances really were. My wife, Liz, was the last baby to be christened on a remote island off the north-west coast (think Stroma but much smaller) and soon afterwards all the families left, going to Canada and other Commonwealth countries for a new life, with Liz's family eventually landing in Boston, where most of them remain. Scottish history is full of such stories and the diaspora of the Scots is of course worldwide. Happily today things have moved on, but we must never forget the lessons of the past, and the right to a proper home, and the ability to remain within it, is enshrined in Human Rights legislation.

Here at Caithness CAB we deal with housing issues every day and the level of work is so high that we have a project, based in Alness, who deal with nothing else but these cases. Generally, most people either rent from the Council or other Social Landlord, or obtain a private rental, with many people buying their own home. Clearly, the first step is to obtain a house in the first place and either the Highland Council or any of the Social Providers can guide you on this if you want to rent, and CCAB can assist you at every stage of the process. Again, if you want to buy then it is always wise to research everything first, speaking to your bank or building society early on and identifying a solicitor who will act for you. We can give you a lot of help via our CAB Money Advice Service and can explain all the details to you, including setting up a savings regime for the deposit and budgeting.

One of the most common problems we see relates to Rent and Council Tax arrears. Unfortunately the current system is not ideal – the original idea of a “council house” was that good quality accommodation would be available at a low price with a view to ensuring that all families, irrespective of income, would have decent living standards with modern facilities. As we all know some of the schemes – for example the 1960's high-rise blocks – were a disaster, but at least the intentions were good. The “right-to-buy” would also have been fine, but there was little or no reinvestment to allow for the provision of new stock and the UK-wide housing shortage is now a major problem. Also, today, rents are anything but low and a large percentage of people occupying what is now called “social housing” would be quite unable to afford the rent, or pay the council tax, without

payment of Housing Benefit and the application of Council Tax Reduction which are calculated according to income. All this is fine in theory, but of course makes no sense in reality, and as a result many people fall into arrears. What has made things worse is the imposition of the hated “bedroom tax”. The utterly brilliant idea here was that if someone had a rented house with say three bedrooms and only “needed” two then they would have to seek a smaller home or lose some of their Housing Benefit – bearing in mind that HB is calculated to make sure that recipients have just enough money to live upon in the first place. Nationwide, CAB therefore advised people to apply for smaller houses – the problem here being that there aren’t any. But our front bench of multi-millionaires decreed that this was just tough and the HB was duly cut even if the occupant had asked for a smaller house. Suicides have resulted. Fortunately – and all credit to them – Holyrood stepped in and introduced “Discretionary Housing Payments” to top up the gap. Apparently the idea of the “tax” was to “free up housing for those who needed more rooms” and compares only with the “Window Tax” of the 18th and 19th Centuries for heavy-handed thoughtlessness. (Incidentally if you have a look around Wick and Thurso there are quite a few houses with bricked-up windows from that era, but whilst you could hide a window there is no way around an “extra” bedroom).

If someone falls into arrears with their Council Tax then, sooner or later, the “debt” is passed to Sheriff’s Officers who issue the relevant demand to the unfortunate “debtor”, adding their own fee on top, and when the person comes to see us we simply arrange a payment plan to repay the arrears. Unfortunately, this also has to include the additional fee to the Sheriff’s Officers. So someone who could not afford to make a payment of CT in the first place now has to repay even more and I do struggle to see the logic in this. Rent arrears are a problem as well – often people will fall into arrears because they have to move from one benefit to another and during the inevitable hiatus the “change of circumstance” means that HB will cease. Again, there is no logic in this and a total rework of the system is long overdue. On the plus side, whatever your problem might be in relation to housing or arrears, CCAB can and will help you, right up to and including court representation if required. So don’t hide the letters behind the clock – bring them to us.

If you are a homeowner then at least you are spared the “bedroom tax”, but you do have to service the mortgage and I would always recommend that you keep a careful eye on things such as the interest rate offered by your provider and the cost of “extras” such as buildings insurance – again CCAB can advise you if you need help with this, and if you still have an Endowment type mortgage repayment plan then watch it’s performance carefully – if the proceeds are going to fall short then the earlier you act the better to make sure that you do not end up with a problem when the loan has to be repaid. And if you are struggling to pay the mortgage (or any other debts) then please get in touch and we will help you.

Please remember that there is now little help from HMG for people who are unemployed or who are long-term sick as regards Mortgage Payments – a 39 week waiting period applies and even then there are restrictions - but we can help you and there are avenues available to sort things out.

As a footnote I see that if you happen to occupy a house in Band “E” or above then, come April, you are likely to see a nasty additional charge on top of the standard CT rise. It would be wise to start budgeting now and we can only hope that, eventually, CT will be properly reformed.

If you are interested in the History of the Clearances I would recommend John Prebble’s eponymously titled book which gives a good account. And now I am going to go home to contemplate whether it’s time for a move into local politics in order to make even more noise about these sort of issues”