

Data Sharing Public Consultation Response From Northern Ireland Fair Rates Campaign

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Fair Rates Campaign (NIFRC) wish to re-state our opposition to the use of the Single Capital Value Model (SCVM) of domestic rates calculation in Northern Ireland and repeat our call for a root and branch review of the current system with a view to adopting a more equitable system based on local income tax.

Section 1:

Increased data sharing powers to improve the up take of rate reliefs by pensioners and low income families is considered by the NIFRC to be a progressive step in addressing the inequity of the SCVM which was imposed by direct rule ministers in 2006. Until a fairer method of rates calculation is introduced, it is in everyone's interest that we take all available steps to improve the rate relief package contained in SCVM and make it more accessible to low income families and pensioners.

Great emphasis is placed on the plight of the pensioners and most of the improvements in the rate relief measures have been geared towards them. We of course agree entirely with this, but would ask that the single parent and low income families are given more consideration in future improvements in the rate relief scheme.

Improving up take of rate relief schemes and indeed all pensioner means tested benefits has been championed by the Government over the years, but there still remains a 40% shortfall in up take of the improved rate relief scheme introduced in the Rates (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Our persistent calls for raising the upper capital savings exclusion from £16,000 to the £50,000 (as recommended by Sir Michael Lyon in his 2007 Report) was at first resisted because of the perceived financial drain on the local Government budgets. The subsequent increase in the upper capital exclusion to £50,000 (following Peter Robinson's Rates Review last year) failed to spark the expected increase in rate relief uptake and indeed only resulted in an additional 9500 rate relief claims from owner occupiers. Instead of a massive rate relief burden resulting, we now know that the £5 million allocated by the Exchequer towards the funding of the additional rate relief for pensioners, was not fully spent.

The NIFRC now ask the current Minister of Finance, Nigel Dodds to abandon the drip, drip approach to improving the rate relief qualification criteria and revisit the section of the Lyons report where Sir Michael lists a number of options that he considered for the

reform of the current eligibility thresholds for council tax benefit (our rates relief) with a view to improving uptake. (Lyons Report Section 7; pages 248 -260).

The research carried out for the Lyons report shows a staggering **£1.36 Billion** unclaimed council tax benefit each year and that is only the pensioner's share. We would ask the Minister of Finance, Mr Dodds to keep this in mind when calculating the cost of any further relaxation of the eligibility thresholds of the Northern Ireland rate relief scheme, as we suspect that the unclaimed rate relief here would be proportionately similar to the unclaimed council tax benefit in GB.

Although somewhat "off topic" in a response to the data sharing consultation document, we believe our diversion into alternative proposals for rate relief up take are relevant at this stage and could even prove more effective than the proposed sharing of data.

The new measures as outlined at page three and four of the consultation document on data sharing would appear to make data held by the Government more secure. However there does **not** appear to be any provision made to have independent checks/audits carried out on the adherence of Land and Property Services' staff to the data protection principles and protocols.

We would like to see an independent audit/check carried out by an external audit team. The responsibility for the selection of this team should rest with the Department of Finance and Personnel. The members of this team must not be drawn from Land and Property Services' staff.

Section 2: Data Sharing – Rate Reliefs – Take Up Issues

While we are happy with the purposes for sharing data as outlined in Section 2 we believe verification that a pensioner lives alone or a disabled person's home has been modified to facilitate their disability, can only be verified by a home visit. In the latter case, provision of a medical certificate will confirm a person's disability, however as the disabled person's allowance (under current legislation) is only payable if the home has been modified, a home visit is the only way of verifying this prerequisite.

We would of course be delighted if it were decided to allow all disabled persons access to the disabled allowance, as we have always expressed our support for the removal of the property modification clause from the qualification criteria for the disabled person's allowance.

Rate relief claimants should have access to the records of those who use their data.

We would not have any concerns about the potential misuse of data providing a strict record of users is kept and an outside independent audit team is appointed to monitor Land and Property Services' staff's adherence to the data protection principles and protocols.

Section 3: Data Sharing - Other Take Up Issues

We are happy that the data sources identified at Section 3 of the consultation document are shared with Land and Property Services to facilitate the assessing of owner occupier housing benefit applications.

Section 4 Summary of findings from the Privacy Impact Assessment

The Privacy Impact Assessment appears to have served its purpose in that we do not see any reason why potential rate relief applicants would object to data sharing under the proposed system.

The proposed measures for notifying potential rate relief claimants of the new use of their data are satisfactory.

At this point we repeat our suggestion to introduce some method of independent monitoring of the various uses made of the client's data by Land and Property Services.

Conclusion

Having watched the recent live transmission from the Northern Ireland Assembly where the Land and Property Services' management team attempted to defend the shortcomings in their computer systems and their apparent understaffing problems, we believe it is essential that a rigorous training programme is undertaken to ensure that Land and Property Services Staff are fully conversant with the proposed new data sharing system. It is also essential that their clerical staff and supervisors do not lose sight of the reason for the proposed introduction of increased data sharing; i.e. to improve the targeting of rate relief up take and the assessing of subsequent claims, while demonstrating the safe and secure handling of all claimant's information.

Signed _____

Raymond Farley
Chairman of Northern Ireland Fair Rates Campaign