

# Housing Benefit Caps – Blueprint for local action



Produced jointly by Housing Justice, London Churches Group for Social Action and Zacchaeus 2000

## 1. Discretionary funds from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)

Lobby the Council to supplement the DCLG discretionary fund to the permitted maximum (2 ½ times the DCLG fund). This will give them scope to provide help in cases of individual hardship.

## 2. Borough Umbrella Groups for Voluntary Organisations

Contact the Council and any local Umbrella Group for Voluntary Organisations. See if it is possible for a leaflet to go out with the Council letters notifying people of the caps, with contact details for organisations that can provide help, e.g. legal advice, housing advice, debt advice, Age Concern, Mind, Churches and faith communities.

## 3. Information

Help people access the support they need by providing information. Offer to display leaflets and posters from the Borough and voluntary organisations offering help.

Details of advice services by Borough can be found at: [www.homelesslondon.org](http://www.homelesslondon.org).

Crisis provide details of private rented sector deposit schemes [www.privatedsector.org.uk/schemes](http://www.privatedsector.org.uk/schemes).

## 4. Cases of individual hardship

Bring cases to the Council which show the need for support from the Discretionary Fund for people who have particular needs, e.g. people who have lived for a long time in the Borough and have no networks of family and friends to move to; children in need of particular schooling.

## 5. Community cohesion

Lobby your Council about the impact on the local community of the number of people who are moving – Boris Johnson's "social cleansing" case.

## 6. Private Landlords

Find out the names of private landlords from the Council and lobby them to lower the rent to within the cap for reliable tenants.

## 7. Landlord and Tenants

Write to the Landlord on behalf of a tenant, requesting a rent reduction.

Prepare a 'standard letter' for the tenant to send to a Landlord, requesting a reduction in rent.

## 8. Write to your MP and Local Councillors

Inform your MP and Local Councillors of the situations of people who are coming to you in distress. The details of cases may be anonymised, if people prefer to remain anonymous.

## 9. 'McKenzie Friend'

Every litigant in person has a right to the support of a friend at a court hearing, called a 'McKenzie Friend', who may take notes and provide emotional support, but has no right to speak without permission of the judge. On arrival at the court, the litigant should tell the usher he/she has a McKenzie Friend. It is sometimes also sensible to accompany the person under threat to meetings with the local authority or job centre. This is true of every court case, but is particularly important when eviction is threatened at a possession hearing, when emotional support is badly needed.

It would be sensible to prepare a statement of weekly income and expenditure and all debts before the hearing, and ensure the Judge knows the facts. Give them to the Usher to give to the Clerk; if circumstances seem right, ask for an adjournment to give time to persuade the landlord to reduce the rent.

There is a shortage of legal aid lawyers available for housing cases, so the McKenzie Friend should ensure that anyone threatened with eviction goes to court, with the suggested information and contacts the duty housing solicitor help desk in every County Court on eviction days

#### **10. Support for people with small shortfalls to stay**

Some people may be impacted by £10 to £12 per week – could food parcels, small help with the budget help people make up the shortfall? Alternatively, consider setting up a [food bank \(www.trusselltrust.org\)](http://www.trusselltrust.org).

#### **11. Support for all affected**

Offer general pastoral care and social support, e.g. Befriending, invite people to social events – to help maintain normal social life and contact at a very stressful time.

#### **12. Bridging to the new community**

Help people make contact with communities/organisations in the community they are moving to. Great if someone from the new home community could visit.

#### **13. Receiving into the new community**

Organise simple neighbourliness, e.g. provide welcome packs of tea, coffee, sugar, biscuits to new neighbours.

#### **Some Christian Organisations active on Housing Issues:**

##### **Housing Justice**

Housing Justice was created in 2003 when CHAS (Catholic Housing Aid Society) and CNHC (Churches' National Housing Coalition) merged. In January 2006 Housing Justice expanded further when it merged with UNLEASH (Church Action on Homelessness in London). Housing Justice combines lobbying and campaigning on housing and homelessness, with practical support for churches helping homeless and insecurely housed people.

[www.housingjustice.org.uk](http://www.housingjustice.org.uk)

##### **Zaccheus 2000 Trust (Z2K)**

Z2K was started as a volunteer organisation in the early 1990s by a group of concerned Christians who refused to pay the poll tax on the grounds it was unjust. The volunteers helped other poll tax defaulters as McKenzie Friends. This spread to work with vulnerable debtors. In 1997, Z2K was registered as a charity and the Reverend Paul Nicolson ran it as a volunteer until 2007, when funds were raised to set up an office and to employ staff. In 1997, the Reverend Paul Nicolson started training other volunteers to be McKenzie Friends and since then the charity has run over 50 courses, training over 300 people.

Phone Paul Nicolson if you want any guidance on McKenzie Friends on 07961 177889

[www.z2k.org](http://www.z2k.org)

**Alison Gelder, Director, Housing Justice**

**Revd Ruth Lampard, Associate Vicar, St Mary The Boltons**

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*Please circulate this Blueprint freely, but note that an updated version may be available from time to time.*

*For more information please contact [a.gelder@housingjustice.org.uk](mailto:a.gelder@housingjustice.org.uk) or [ruth@stmarytheboltons.org.uk](mailto:ruth@stmarytheboltons.org.uk)*

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<http://www.londonchurchesgroup.org.uk/>