

News

Catholic leader in attack on coalition's cut in benefits for most vulnerable

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The head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales has condemned the Government's welfare cuts, warning that vulnerable families will suffer most under the changes.

The Archbishop of Westminster, the Most Rev Vincent Nichols, singled out the cuts in housing benefit as particularly punitive and likely to result in thousands of poor families being forced out of their homes.

He made his comments in a letter, seen by *The Times*, to Iain Duncan Smith, the Work and Pensions Secretary, who is a practising Catholic. The Archbishop warned that homelessness was already on the increase for the first time in a decade, and that youth homelessness was up 15 per cent.

"I recognise the difficulties which must arise in seeking to promote fairness between those in work and those of working age receiving benefits, but our own agencies working with poor families are increasingly concerned with how the detail of the changes will affect those families," he wrote.

His letter echoed the concerns raised by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who as guest editor of the *New Statesman* used an editorial to attack the Government, warning that it was committing the country to "radical, long-term policies for which no one voted".

The Churches are particularly anxious about the cuts because they often end up helping those worst affected, with hostels and soup kitchens.

Archbishop Nichols referred to the Department for Work and Pensions' own figures, which show that 50,000 families are losing £93 a week after welfare reforms — "a significant sum for those struggling financially", he wrote.

"As you know, some estimates that have already appeared in the media suggest that 40,000 families may be rendered homeless. If this were indeed the case it would surely be a perverse result of policies aimed at reducing dependency of the 'benefits culture',

since emergency support would immediately need to be put in place.

"In some areas of Westminster, it is being suggested that one in six children may have to move home (and probably move school), while in Maida Vale the effects may force up to 43 per cent of households to move. We fear that the cost of this may be felt most by vulnerable families, whose support networks may rapidly disappear in the process."

Housing benefit payments stood at £11.2 billion in 1998 but are predicted to reach £24.7 billion by 2015.

Among the changes are a requirement that claimants living in privately rented accommodation find properties among the cheapest 30 per cent in their area. The higher rate for a five-bedroom house has been scrapped and the maximum level for all other properties reduced, with new weekly caps of £250

£93

reforms' weekly cost to 50,000 families

Source: Department for Work and Pensions

for a one-bedroom property and £400 for one with four bedrooms.

The Department for Work and Pensions said yesterday that it had set aside £191 million to help those most deeply affected to move, or have their rent subsidised.

A spokesman confirmed that Mr Duncan Smith had received the letter. "Our housing benefit reforms are about restoring fairness to a system which has spiralled out of control and ensuring that benefit claimants make the same choices about affordability as everyone else," the spokesman said.

"We are not expecting large numbers of households to become homeless through these measures, but we are making an additional £130 million over the next four years available to local authorities to support vulnerable households and help smooth the transition of the housing benefit changes."