

AGENDA ITEM:

23 October 2012

REPORT TO EXECUTIVE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

SUMMARY

1. This paper outlines the feedback received from the consultation events held between 13 August and 17 September on the draft Local Council Tax Support Scheme. It describes the feedback received to date. The report also details some further work carried out to estimate the impact of the changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Executive Scrutiny Committee are requested to:
 - note the consultation feedback
 - note the impact assessment information.

BACKGROUND

3. A draft of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme was approved for public consultation at the Cabinet meeting on 9 August 2012. The draft scheme then went out for public consultation on 13 August 2012 for a period of 10 weeks, until 19 October 2012. This is an interim report on the feedback from that consultation.
4. As part of the consultation on the Local Council Tax Support scheme a number of engagement routes were undertaken:
 - Questionnaires were delivered via the Herald and Post network to all households in the borough. There has been a good response with 1016 questionnaires completed up to 18 September and questionnaires are still being received daily.
 - Five public consultation sessions held over the wider geography of Stockton. Whilst these events have not been very well attended (19 people/representatives attended) the detailed conversations held provided an opportunity to give individual advice to residents or to clarify the intentions of the scheme. Residents were then encouraged or assisted to complete the questionnaire to capture their views.
 - The survey was also made available via the internet. These responses are included in the numbers of questionnaires completed (above)
 - Information on the strategy was shared with a range of partnerships and groups (as identified in the consultation and engagement plan) to raise awareness and signpost to the consultation.

Consultation Feedback Questionnaire

5. The consultation questionnaire asked residents and other interested parties to what extent they agreed with the principles of the proposed scheme. By 18 September 830 responses had been input and were available for analysis. Of these 223 (27%) were from people currently claiming council tax benefit, including 81 (9.75%) from working age council tax benefit recipients- those who will be directly affected by the proposals.
6. There appears to be a majority agreement with key principles 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 by all age groups and by benefit claimants and non benefit claimants alike. In the case of principles 1 (All people of working age should pay some council tax) and 4 (Every working age adult in the household should be expected to contribute to Council tax payments) the majority of people of working age claiming council tax benefit disagreed, whilst the majority of others were in agreement. Full details of the analysis can be found at Appendix 1

Open Questions

7. The questionnaire also asked two open questions. The following is an illustration of the most commonly used words in the responses:-



Work is ongoing to analyse the responses to the two open questions asked as part of the consultation, with such a high number of responses this analysis is taking some time to complete.

8. Of the questionnaires input by 17 September 546 had responded to question 3 in such a way that their responses could be analysed in some way. An analysis of these open responses is attached at appendix 2. This groups the responses according to key themes and gives the numbers of people responding whose response reflected that theme. Similar themes are emerging from answers to question 4.

Partnership and Consultation Events

9. In addition to the questionnaire a number of partnership meetings were attended and 5 public drop in sessions were held. At these events, individuals were encouraged to complete the questionnaire in order to record their views. A log of the meetings and events attended is attached at Appendix 3.

Precepting authorities

10. Officers held a meeting with Town Councils on 12.09.12 and attended the Parish Council Liaison Forum on 18.09.12. Following a brief introduction

about the background to the changes and the draft LCTS scheme, there was discussion about the potential financial implications for town and parish councils. Attendees were also made aware of a Government consultation paper on this issue. There were questions about the timescales for the parishes to be advised of their new taxbases in order to set their precepts. An offer was made to supply estimated taxbase figures in advance of the publication of new taxbase regulations if individual parish councils thought these would be helpful and wanted to request them.

11. Full analysis of all responses and consultation events will be carried out at the end of the consultation period and reported to Cabinet at the 29 November meeting. A number of respondents have asked for feedback on the results of the consultation and a copy of the details will be sent to them when the process is complete.

Key Themes/ Issues

12. From discussions with residents at drop in sessions and from the analysis of some of the responses it appears that a number of residents have taken the consultation to be about proposed changes to council tax, rather than changes to council tax benefit. Responses should be considered in light of this.
13. It has been the intention to deliver the document to every household in the borough. However there have been a number of reports of questionnaires not being received, which we have tried to address with the Herald and Post network. It is not possible to guarantee 100% distribution of the questionnaires.
14. Some comments have been received that people have been unaware of changes planned, particularly those who may be most affected by these and other welfare reform changes.

Ward level information

15. Some further analysis has been carried out showing the numbers of households affected by the proposals within each ward in the borough. Details of numbers affected can be found in the table below, and Appendix 4 contains a map highlighting the working age households likely to be affected by the proposals.

Table 3 – Numbers of Council Tax Benefit claimants by ward.

Ward	No of Claimants	Pensioners	Working age	Joint housing benefit case
Billingham Central	1210	556	654	883
Billingham East	1304	491	813	976
Billingham North	495	259	236	215
Billingham South	976	432	544	786
Billingham West	303	215	88	72
Bishopsgarth &	558	342	216	311

Elm Tree				
Eaglescliffe	587	320	267	273
Fairfield	408	267	141	134
Grangefield	446	250	196	222
Hardwick	1578	625	953	1361
Hartburn	316	207	109	78
Ingleby Barwick East	315	124	191	144
Ingleby Barwick West	245	53	192	104
Mandale & Victoria	2041	765	1276	1662
Newtown	1478	376	1102	1210
Northern Parishes	72	37	35	40
Norton North	1079	452	627	801
Norton South	962	368	594	648
Norton West	377	266	111	127
Parkfield & Oxbridge	1321	338	983	1024
Roseworth	1234	571	663	885
Stainsby Hill	1087	481	606	786
Stockton Town Centre	2031	641	1390	1853
Village	984	466	518	659
Western Parishes	199	120	79	107
Yarm	519	302	217	314

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

16. There are no financial and legal implications resulting from this report on the interim findings from the public consultation.

RISK ASSESSMENT

17. A risk assessment has been carried out and this report is categorised as high risk, scoring 16. Risks identified are due to the uncertainty relating to legislation, funding and the very tight timescales. In addition risks relate to the reduction in funding for the Council and potential loss of income for residents. Risk will be closely monitored as part of the Welfare Reform governance arrangements and the assessment revised as further information becomes available and public consultation progresses.

COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

1-Economic Regeneration and Transport

The proposed scheme helps promote employment by enhancing the work incentives included in the current scheme.

2- Environment and Housing

n/a

3- Safer Communities

n/a

4-Children and Young People

The proposals to additional advice and information provision will support economic well-being and build on work to prevent homelessness by providing access to effective support and advice services.

5- Healthier Communities and Adults

The proposed scheme promotes the provision of support for vulnerable adults and older adults within our communities. Current and future pensioners will be protected, receiving the same level of support as under the current Council Tax Benefit scheme. For working age claimants the means test will acknowledge additional costs associated with bringing up a family, caring for others or coping with disability.

Supporting Themes

Stronger Communities

The proposals to fund additional advice and information provision together with the existing payment methods available will promote financial inclusion, providing residents with access to financial advice.

Older Adults

Current and future pensioners are protected from reductions in support, receiving the same level of help with council tax as under the current Council tax Benefit scheme.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS

Consultation has included all elected members, police and fire authority representatives, town and parish councils, community and voluntary sector representatives and all residents of the Borough.

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Background Papers

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors:

All

Property

None