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17 October 2012

To Members of Parliament for Stockton North and Stockton South

Dear [Alex] [James]

### **Local Council Tax Support Scheme**

The Safer Stockton Partnership is the statutory multi-agency partnership for reducing crime and anti-social behaviour across the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees.

At the last meeting of the Partnership we received a presentation on the proposed Local Council Tax Support Scheme on which Stockton Council is currently consulting, and it was agreed that I should write to you on behalf of the Partnership to express our concerns.

Members of the Partnership were generally supportive of the way in which the Council has set about the task of applying the Government's requirement for local authorities to reduce the cost of Council Tax Benefit by at least 10%, and agreed with the seven principles set out by the Council, but were nevertheless concerned about the potential impact of these additional pressures on low income households. In particular, there was concern that crime levels may increase as a result, especially in the context of the cumulative impact of other welfare reform measures on the same households, including the other measures in relation to Housing Benefit. These measures will increase the financial pressures faced by many households at the lowest end of the range of household income. Already there is some emerging evidence that women in the over 40 age range, are starting to appear in greater numbers than ever seen before among the analysis of first time offenders. Furthermore, recent crime figures in the borough have presented a worrying increase in shoplifting.

Analysis shows that the second most common item stolen from shops (after candles) in the Cleveland Police area is cheese. The combined implications of these pieces of information are that we could be facing the prospect of a surge in crime, as the new measures come into effect and standards of living in the lowest income households are squeezed still further.

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We are also concerned about the complexity of the interaction of the various measures. For example, the aspect of the changes to the housing benefit system which effectively places a sanction on 'under-occupation' may lead to reduced family cohesion as grandparents and estranged parents may not be able to retain a spare bedroom for their children or grandchildren to stay over. In Stockton, this sanction on under-occupation will be of little predicted value, because of the availability of family housing in the local stock but our main social housing provider, Tristar Homes Ltd, have indicated that over 2000 households will be affected by the impact of under occupation. It is inevitable that many of our poorer residents will struggle with increasing debt and will be at the mercy of money lenders, with no prospect of re-housing them in suitable accommodation in the same local areas in which they currently reside.

The full consequences are difficult to predict but our members feel that locally we will meet further challenges in terms of community cohesion, sustainable communities and increases in crime. We appreciate that this measure has been based on housing supply in other parts of the country, but we consider that this demonstrates the inadvisability of imposing a national solution to a regional problem.

There are so many changes in the pipeline that it has proved impossible to date to come up with a reliable model of the impact locally but taking into account further rises in energy costs there can little doubt that we are faced with difficult times ahead in terms of crime and disorder.

We appreciate that at this stage it would be very difficult to change the course of action which the Government is pursuing, but members of the Partnership wanted to make their views known to you as their local representatives in Parliament.

Yours sincerely

Mike Batty  
pp Geoff Lee  
Chair of Safer Stockton Partnership