

APPENDIX A

Co-operative & Communities and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees

Response to the proposed localised Council Tax Support scheme

The Co-operative & Communities and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees jointly reviewed the proposed Council Tax Support scheme at meetings on 11th and 23rd October and were also provided with additional supporting information outside the meetings.

Members met with Cllr. Bill McClements, Cabinet Member Resources & Service Delivery; Cllr. Liz Clare, Cabinet Member Adult & Social Care; Cllr. Paul Watling, Cabinet Member Children & Young People; Angie Astley, Assistant Director Customer & People Services; Lee Higgins, Benefit Service Delivery Manager and Sophie Lane, Revenues Service Delivery Manager who all assisted the Committee in their work and deliberations.

The Committees considered the implications of the proposed scheme for the Council and for residents who would be affected by the scheme, and also considered alternative models and their impacts.

Members have agreed a number of comments and recommendations to submit for consideration as part of the consultation on the scheme. This response will be presented to Council when the final scheme is decided. A joint response was submitted separately to Policy Review in favour of declining the Council Tax Support Transition grant, and this response is confined to the Council Tax Scheme under consultation

Comments

- The Co-operative & Communities and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees support the proposed scheme as the fairest and best possible under the regrettable circumstances of having to make cuts to Council Tax benefits.
- It was acknowledged that although it was desirable to protect as many vulnerable people as possible, the cost of treating one group as vulnerable (for example families with children) would be at the expense of another group (non-vulnerable working age customers) and that the right balance had been struck.
- The Committees recognised that the consultation process had been extensive and welcomed the fact that all households had been given an opportunity to take part and not just those in receipt of the benefits.
- Members would like to commend Angie Astley and the Revenues and Benefits team for their hard work in developing the proposed scheme along side work on the other welfare reform changes, and in particular would like to thank Lee Higgins for the preparation and clear presentation of complex information which greatly helped the work of the Committees.

Recommendations

- Members were concerned that although there had been an extensive consultation exercise, it was possible that there were still a great many people who may be unaware that from April 2013 they will have to pay some or more Council Tax. Members therefore recommend that there is a continued awareness campaign targeted at affected groups, and that low- or no-cost ways of reaching these people are explored such as by putting information slips into housing benefit notifications.
- There was concern about the enforcement of the empty property tax, and it was recommended that consideration should be given as to how empty properties will be identified, and whether Council Tax demands can be back-dated to the date the property became rather than from the date it is identified.
- Although the scheme was considered the fairest and best possible within current time and IT constraints, it is essential that the scheme is thoroughly assessed post-implementation to identify unintended consequences and improvements that can be made for 2014. The Co-operative & Communities and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees will scope work for a joint review over the year following the introduction of the scheme with a view to making recommendations in this area.