

## Appendix G

### Local Council Tax Support - Communication & Consultation Plan

#### 1. Background

Central Bedfordshire Council services are funded primarily by two sources; Government grant and council tax. Council Tax benefits and discounts are given in specific circumstances (i.e. benefits claimants may be out of work, Council Tax reductions can apply for those living in single occupancy, or who own either empty or second homes etc). The Government currently gives Councils money to cover the costs of Council Tax benefits.

As part of the Government's welfare reform programme, the national Council Tax Benefits Scheme is to be abolished from next April. Councils are therefore required to develop their own schemes. However, future funding allocation from the Government to Councils will be reduced by 10-14%. In Central Bedfordshire this means a £2.5m gap in funding.

Central Bedfordshire Council has developed a draft Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) scheme that will replace the existing Council Tax Benefits scheme.

The scheme has been designed to be affordable and is based on guiding principles, based on fairness, affordability and protecting the vulnerable.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has provided guidance<sup>1</sup> to local billing authorities which sets out their requirements regarding consultation. The document specifies that, before adopting a scheme, the billing authority must in the following order:

- a. consult any major precepting authority which has power to issue a precept to it,
- b. publish a draft scheme in such manner as it thinks fit, and
- c. consult such other persons as it considers are likely to have an interest in the operation of the scheme.

The guidance goes on to state:

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<sup>1</sup> Localising Support for Council Tax, A Statement of Intent, DCLG May 2012

Precepting authorities should be engaged early in the development of the local council tax scheme in order to shape the initial proposals.

Although the Government's code of practice on consultation states that normally 12 weeks is appropriate, billing authorities may wish to consider the appropriate length of their consultation depending on the impact of their proposals and the ability to complete the consultation exercise within budgetary timetables.

The code of practice indicates that where timing is restricted, for example, due to having to meet a fixed timetable such as a budget cycle, there may be good reason for a shorter consultation, and any documentation should be clear for the reasons for the shorter timetable.

In considering their timetable a billing authority will also need to consider that if effective consultation is carried out it also takes time to gather the feedback, understand the key themes and impacts and take it through any internal governance processes to get agreement on any final changes.

This guidance has informed our consultation plan.

## **2. Key Messages**

### a. Why is LCTS being introduced?

- Central Government Welfare Reform – reducing dependency
- Contribution to national deficit reduction
- Reduced funding (in Central Bedfordshire – 14% less funding).

### b. What is LCTS?

- Abolition of existing benefits model
- Local schemes of discounts
- To be introduced by April 2013.

c. Guiding principles & specific principles

Principle	Specific proposals
1. Affordability	<p>The Council Tax Support Scheme needs to be affordable and sustainable for the Council in the longer term rather than drawing on Council reserves, which can only be used once, or having any impact on frontline Council services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowances/premiums frozen at 2012/13 levels</li> </ul>
2. A fair contribution – those who can pay, should pay.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People deemed not to be vulnerable, will receive a maximum reduction of 75% rather than 100% in the amount of council tax they are required to pay.</li> <li>• Abolish second adult rebate - all non dependent residents in a household assumed to contribute.</li> <li>• Full council tax for empty homes and second homes.</li> <li>• 150% council tax for long term (2 years +) empty homes.</li> </ul>
3. The scheme should incentivise work - encourage people to earn a living.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the earnings disregard by £10 per week. This means when some one starts work or increases their hours/earnings we will take less of their new earnings into account.</li> </ul>
4. The most vulnerable claimants should be protected (from the minimum contribution)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pensioners currently receiving Council Tax Benefit will receive the same level of support. The Government wants to ensure that low income pensioners, who would struggle to pay Council Tax without additional support, and who the Government does not expect to work to increase their income, will continue to receive the same level of support against their Council Tax bills. Pensioners currently make up 48% of our Council Tax Benefit caseload.</li> <li>• The scheme will also protect existing Council Tax Benefit claimants who are vulnerable, this includes lone parents with children under five years of age, disabled persons receiving specific forms of disability income and</li> </ul>

	claimants who are in receipt of carers allowance. People receiving Council Tax Benefit for these reasons will receive the same reduction in the new scheme, unless their income increases.
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d. Consultation

- Consultation open to all
- 12 week consultation period
- Targeted consultation with specific vulnerable groups and claimants

e. Timeline

- Consultation on draft scheme from 22<sup>nd</sup> August to 14<sup>th</sup> November 2012.
- Executive to agree final scheme in January 2013

**3. Consultation plan**

The timetable below sets out the key milestones in terms of the consultation.

<b>When</b>	<b>What</b>	<b>Who</b>
July/ early August	Consult Fire and Police (major precepting authorities)	MJ
July/ early August	Write to Town and Parish Councils	MJ
August	Brief Cabinet	GS/MJ
August	Brief opposition leaders	MJ
August	Brief Customer Services so they can help customers	KA
August	Brief Revenue and Benefits staff and CAB so they can help customers	JL
21 <sup>st</sup> August	Executive approve the draft scheme for consultation	
21 <sup>st</sup> August	Brief Revs & Bens staff and CAB	JL
21 <sup>st</sup> August	Attend Landlords Forum	JL

21 <sup>st</sup> / 22 <sup>nd</sup> August	Comms launch consultation online	KA
	Comms issue press release to all local media	LM
	Send consultation documents and response forms to Libraries, Council offices and Customer Service Centres with briefing note.	KA
	Promote consultation via, News Central (delivered to every household in September), social media and email bulletins.	KA
	Write to all existing claimants (17,000) with a copy of the consultation document and response form.	JL
	Write to existing Discount and Exemption customers with a copy of the consultation document and response form.	
	Write to Fire, Police, MPs, Town and Parish Councils to invite them to participate in the consultation. and invite the Town and Parish Councils to the Town and Parish Council Conference.	KA
	Write to voluntary sector organisations (i.e. CAB, Disability Resource centre) and landlords to invite them to participate in the consultation.	KA
September	500 telephone interviews with a cross section of the public	KA
6 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Attend Leighton Buzzard work club (unemployed people)	JL
7 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Deadline for article for Housing Matters (social housing tenants)	KA
11 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Attend Houghton Regis work club (unemployed people)	JL
13 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Attend Bedfordshire Benefits Network	JL
18 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Attend Child Poverty Group	JL
20 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Attend the Equality Forum	JL
25 <sup>th</sup> September	Special Town Council Conference	
11 <sup>th</sup> October	Attend Carers Delivery Partnership Meeting	JL
24 <sup>th</sup> October	Attend Carers Forum	JL
	Attend Older People Reference Group	JL
	Attend Houghton Regis Children's Centre (Lone parents with young children)	JL
	Attend Dunstable Children's Centre (Lone parents with young children)	JL
	disabled people	JL
	Attend Beds Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)	JL
October	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	

14 <sup>th</sup> November	Consultation closes	KA
28 <sup>th</sup> November	Report available summarising the consultation feedback	KA
December	Members consider the consultation feedback and finalise the Scheme	
January 2013	Executive agree final Council Tax Scheme	
January 2013	Full Council agree final Council Tax Scheme	
January 2013	Write to all stakeholders to update them on the agreed Council Tax Scheme	KA
January 2013	Issue a press release to all local media	LM

The main consultation mechanism will be a consultation document (which sets out our plans) and a response form (which captures peoples views in a structured way). Copies of the consultation document and the response form will be made available on the council's website and in Libraries, Council offices and Customer Service Centres across the area.

In order to enable detailed analysis of the consultation feedback the consultation response form will need to collect data about the following:

- Family structure
- Number and ages of children living in household
- Nature of employment full time part-time or temporary work
- Income/ salary - explore the impact on families whose income is around £20k
- Current benefits
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Age (actual age not groups)
- Disability
- Sexual orientation
- Caring responsibilities
- Home postcode

During the consultation the council will actively engage with key vulnerable groups and partners to ensure that we incorporate their views when developing our final scheme. The groups and how we will engage with them are provided in the next section.

#### 4. Stakeholders and Channels

The following internal stakeholders need to be fully briefed before the consultation and then kept up to date with any significant changes or developments.

<b>Internal Stakeholders</b>	<b>What do they need to know</b>	<b>How will we communicate with them</b>	<b>When do we need to communicate</b>
Executive Member	Detailed briefing of proposals and consultation programme Progress updates	Face to face briefing	Before Executive in August
Executive Members	Detailed briefing of proposals and consultation programme	Face to face briefing – Leadership Team	Before Executive in August
Leader of the Opposition	Detailed briefing of proposals and consultation programme	Written briefing	As August Executive papers are published. August
Ward Members	Detailed briefing of proposals and consultation programme	Member’s Information Bulletin.	As August Executive reports are published.
CMT	Detailed briefing of proposals and process. Progress updates	Progress reports to CMT as part of the project management	Before Executive in August
Customer Services	General briefing, how residents can have their say, routes for managing customer enquiries	Email a briefing note.	Before Executive in August

The following external stakeholders may either need to be briefed and/or consulted.

<b>External Stakeholder</b>	<b>Why? What do they need to know</b>	<b>How will we communicate with them</b>	<b>How will we consult with them</b>	<b>When do we need to communicate</b>
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MPs for the area	Awareness raising, understand purpose and proposed scheme, promote how to have their say, update on final decision.	Face to face briefing / letter with a briefing note sent directly to local MPs	At regular MP meeting or via written process. .	Post August Executive
Local media	Awareness raising, understand purpose, correct misconceptions, promote how to have their say, update on final decision.	1. Executive report available online. 2. Powerpoint presentation online. 3. FAQs online 2. Press release.	n/a	1. Exec report available two weeks before Exec 2. Press release after Exec in August 3. Offer face to face briefing with local media. 4. Subsequent media relations to maintain profile and give feedback from September to January.
All Town and Parish Councils	Awareness raising, understand purpose, implications for them and their residents, promote how to have their say, update on final decision.	Email / letter directly to clerks.	Consultation document and response form (paper or online).  Bespoke event (Town & Parish Conference)	At the launch of the consultation  During consultation  Immediately after Exec in Dec
Residents	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	News Central (early September), local media, CBC website, CBC Update Bulletin, Libraries, social media, Housing	Consultation document and response form (paper copies in every Library, and online).	Immediately after Exec in August to launch the consultation.  Pres release/ media after

Existing 17,500 council tax benefit claimants	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	matters magazine, Direct mail/Email, Housing matters magazine.	Consultation document and response form (paper copies in every Library, and online).	final decision in Dec. Immediately after Exec in August to launch the consultation.  Pres release/ media after final decision in Dec. During consultation period
Older people	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	As per residents plus Older People's Reference Group	As per residents plus <b>Attend older people's reference group.</b>	During consultation period
Unemployed people	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	As per residents plus job groups	As per residents plus Attend job groups in Leighton Buzzard library and Houghton Regis Library	During consultation period
Single parents with children under 5	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	As per residents plus attend children's centres	As per residents plus Attend children's centres (incl. Houghton Regis & Dunstable)	During consultation period
Low income working families with	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their	As per residents plus: Child Poverty Strategy	As per residents plus Attend children's centres (incl. Houghton Regis &	During consultation period

children under the age of 11	say, update on final decision.	Group and Child Pverty Action Group	Dunstable)	
BME Groups	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	Mail out to Children's charities and CAB As per residents plus: <b>Publicise in BR&amp;EC newsletter, mail out to faith groups</b>	As per residents plus	During consultation period
Disabled People & Carers	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	As per residents plus: <b>Could also circulate information via social care voluntary sector contacts, carers forum and Disability Resource Centre</b>	As per residents plus <b>Disability resource Centre</b> Letter to carers & attend carers forum Attend Carers Delivery Partnership Meeting	During consultation period
LGB / Gender Reassignment/ religion and belief / pregnancy and maternity	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, how to have their say, update on final decision.	As per residents plus equality forum	As per residents plus	During consultation period
Equality Forum	Consider and understand equality implications to help	Attend equality forum	Feedback from meeting.	September

Housing associations	develop Equality Impact Assessment. Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, implications for HA and tenants, how to have their say, update on final decision.	Email, meetings	As per residents plus meetings.	Immediately after Exec in August to launch the consultation.
Voluntary organisations: Key infrastructure organisations plus CAB,	Awareness raising, understand proposed scheme, implications for vol org and vulnerable people they support, how to have their say, update on final decision. May also be able to provide support to residents	Email	As per residents plus Meetings on request.  Attend Bedfordshire Benefits Network meeting	Pres release/ media after final decision. Immediately after Exec in August to launch the consultation.  Pres release/ media after final decision.

## 5. Products to be developed

Below are the lists of products that need to be developed with deadlines and lead officers.

What	Lead	Deadline
Consultation document	Julie and Karen	13 <sup>th</sup> August (allows one week for printing and distribution)
Consultation response form	Karen Aspinall	13 <sup>th</sup> August (allows one week for printing and distribution)
Posters	Karen Aspinall	13 <sup>th</sup> August (allows one week for printing and distribution)
Online powerpoint	Karen Aspinall	20 <sup>th</sup> August
Online FAQs	Julie Luckman	20 <sup>th</sup> August
Presentation for face to face meetings	Karen Aspinall	22 <sup>nd</sup> August

News Central article	Louise Manders	??
Housing Matters article	Karen Aspinall	6 <sup>th</sup> September
Stakeholder mailing list	Karen and Julie	21 <sup>st</sup> August
Press releases & media enquiries	Louise Manders	21 <sup>st</sup> August
Social media updates	Karen Aspinall	21 <sup>st</sup> August
Interview questions	Karen Aspinall	1 <sup>st</sup> September
Presentation for Town and Parish Council Conference	Karen Aspinall	tbc

## 6. Roles and Responsibilities

The following project team has been established:

Name	Job Title	Role
Gary Muskett	Head of Revenues	Lead officer. Attendance a consultation meetings. Sign off on key documents.
Julie Luckman	Customer Accounts Manager	Booking into different vulnerable group meetings. Support on developing consultation document.
Revs & Bens Team		Note taking at consultation meetings. Printing and distribution of consultation material. Mailing out to existing benefit claimants.
Karen Aspinall	E-Communcation & Consultation	Consultation plan, Consultation document review, Consultation response form, social media, analysis of consultation response and write report. Development of a supporting presentation for face to face meetings.
Louise Manders	External Communications	Consultation document review, News Central, media relations and responding to media enquiries.
Clare Harding	Corporate Policy Advisor	Equality forum, EIA development and advisor on consultation plan.