

## **MINUTE EXTRACT**

### **SCRUTINY PANEL 10 NOVEMBER 2015**

#### **29. Local Council Tax Support 2016/17**

Samantha Preston, Customer Solutions Manager, introduced the Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2016/17 report. The Panel is invited to review and comment on the proposed Local Council Tax Support scheme ahead of the Cabinet meeting on 25 November, and the Full Council meeting on 10 December 2015 where approval of the scheme will be requested. The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Mark Cory had wanted to attend the Scrutiny Panel, but was unable to do so.

Samantha Preston stated that this is the fourth year the scheme has operated. It is recommended to bring the scheme in line with national legislative amendments and to propose that the backdating of working age local Council Tax Support applications be limited to four weeks. The second recommended change is to increase the applicable non dependant deduction from £11 to £12. All other fundamental elements of the scheme are proposed to remain unaltered.

As part of the scheme billing authorities are required to hold public consultation, results of which are included in the report. The majority of respondents agreed with the terms presented in relation to the non-dependant deduction, however the proposed changes to backdating did not receive agreement in the majority, although a number of individual comments did support the suggested changes.

#### **Have Your Say!**

Councillor Willets had his say regarding the Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2016/17, and highlighted that he supported the good work of the scheme in helping people across Colchester. Cllr Willets stated that he was concerned by the level of consultation that had taken place for such an important scheme. Cllr Willets highlighted that there was 11,000 residents who were in receipt of the scheme, and only 123 people started to respond, even less completed the consultation document.

Councillor Willets questioned whether a review of the Colchester Borough Council's consultation procedures should be included in the Scrutiny Panel Work Programme. Improving the number of respondents to consultations would help to ensure that a decision has incorporated the views of individuals from across the Borough.

The following issues were raised by Councillors:

- Councillor J Young – Are there any exceptions to the limit of backdating payments, for example for those residents who have had extended hospital stay?
- Councillor Davies – Why has the alternative options of setting a minimum income level for self-employed persons for working age residents not been explored?
- Councillor Pearson – Highlighted concerns with the number of respondents to the consultation and requested that the information provided in the scheme be more user friendly.
- Councillor Moore – What is the reason for the inclusion of polygamous marriages within the scheme?

The following responses were provided by Samantha Preston:

- There are not any proposed exceptions for the backdating limit, as the policy now matches the guidance for housing benefit applications. This means that applications LCTS and Housing Benefit can be assessed simultaneously. There is a hardship fund that can be used to help individuals in certain exceptional circumstances.
- A response to Councillor Davies' question will be provided by Cllr Cory after the meeting.
- With regard to the consultation it is a disappointing return, however work was undertaken with Local Authority Partners to develop the consultation, and it was hosted on Essex County Council's consultation portal. There are restrictions on the questions that need to be asked due to the complexity of the scheme
- A response to Councillor Moore's question will be provided by Officers after the meeting.

The Scrutiny Panel raised concerns about the low number of respondents to the Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2016/17, particularly when the scheme affects 11,000 residents across the Borough. The Panel commented that the response rate does not provide assurances that residents' views are fully represented.

*RESOLVED* that:

- (a) Colchester Borough Council's consultation policy be reviewed in light of the low response rates in the Local Council Tax Scheme 2015/16.
- (b) The Scrutiny Panel receive an update on Colchester Borough Council's consultation policy.