

MINUTE EXTRACT SCRUTINY PANEL 8 NOVEMBER 2016

93. Local Council Tax Support 2017/18

Councillor Mark Cory, Portfolio Holder for Resources, introduced the Local Council Tax Support 2017/18 report. The report invites the Panel to review and comment on the proposed Local Council Tax Support scheme commencing 2017/18. Comments from the Panel will be considered ahead of the Cabinet meeting of 30 November 2016 and Full Council on 8 December 2016 where approval of the scheme will be requested.

Councillor Cory stated that the Local Council Tax Support scheme comes to the Scrutiny Panel each year and focuses on how the scheme may need to be altered following national legislative amendments. Councillor Cory outlined that the scheme current helps 10,100 residents, and that includes people of all ages some of whom are fully supported and others who receive smaller levels of support.

In the current scheme, all working age recipients of Local Council Tax Support have to pay a minimum contribution of 20% towards their Council Tax. The scheme does also include a back to work bonus where if a resident gets a job they are paid four weeks in arrears; this ensures that the recipient receives an income before any support provided is stopped.

The changes proposed in the report include amending the backdating of support to one calendar month; which brings it in line with housing benefit. The second change is to reduce the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Local Council Tax Support from 13 weeks to four weeks. Councillor Cory highlighted that there will be exceptions to this rule if there is a justified reason, for example a death in the family.

Councillor Cory also highlighted that the report includes information about the financial elements of the scheme, and that the scheme was one of the most generous across Essex. The Local Council Tax Support scheme supports residents in the Borough and assists with Council Tax collection. Councillor Cory stated that with the proposed changes the scheme is anticipated to cost Colchester Borough Council £261,000.

Councillor Davies stated that the report would need to include a specific reference to the reduction to the four-week period as part of the second proposal in paragraph 4.2.

In addition, Councillor Davies welcomed that the time absent from Great Britain would not include stays in hospital and questioned how the Council would know that an individual would be outside the Country for more than four weeks. In response Jason Granger, Customer Interventions Manager, stated that it is the responsibility of the resident to declare a change in circumstances. Officers within the team will assess and declarations where circumstances have changed, and also ensure that underlying checks on caseloads are completed throughout the year.

Councillor Coleman questioned Councillor Cory regarding the wider costs if Colchester Borough Council did not provide the scheme. In response Councillor Cory stated that without the scheme low income families would struggle and the Council would be adding to the difficult issues that these families already have, potentially pushing them past the breaking point. If it was expected that these families pay more towards their Council tax, there would be those who are not able to pay; resulting in a mutual disbenefit for both the local resident and Colchester Borough Council. Councillor Cory also confirmed that the cost of the scheme is offset by the significant benefits that it provides.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel reviewed and commented on the recommendations in respect of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2017/18.