

Appendix A4 – Questions from Area Consultative Forums

Kensal and Kilburn ACF

- 1. Will the changes affect my 25% discount given for me being the only adult resident in my home?**

No. This discount is unaffected by the proposed changes.

- 2. How will efficiencies that may be obtained from preventing or reducing fraud impact upon the £5.2M savings required?**

Overpaid Council Tax Benefit is generally recovered from a claimant through their Council Tax monthly instalments and whether due to fraud or claimant error, attracts the same amount of subsidy from central government (i.e. 40%).

An overpayment can only be categorised as being due to fraud where a claimant has either been found guilty of an offence, admitted an offence in an interview under caution, or agreed to pay an administrative penalty. Consequently, overpayments identified as being due to Council Tax Benefit fraud are relatively small in comparison to overall expenditure and therefore would appear to have minimal impact upon the level of financial savings being sought from the localised Council Tax Support scheme next year.

I would add that the Council takes all reasonable steps to prevent fraud from occurring and will seek to prosecute in those cases where fraud has been identified and it is in the public interest to do so. Additionally, repayment of the overpaid amount of Benefit will also be sought from the claimant in such circumstances.

- 3. Will the proposed changes affect Council Tax discounts and exemptions?**

No. The proposals will not affect Council Tax discounts and exemptions.

- 4. Is the impact of the proposed changes being considered together with the other reforms taking place?**

An impact assessment of the changes is being carried out.

Wembley ACF

- 1. Will the changes affect my 25% discount given for me being the only adult resident in my home?**

No. This discount is unaffected by the proposed changes.

2. How will receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) impact upon the proposals?

If you are in receipt of DLA, you will be protected from the requirement to make a minimum contribution of 20% towards your Council Tax.

3. Will you be contacting MENCAP regarding the proposals?

Yes. It is our intention to speak with their representatives tomorrow.

BME and Multi Faith Forum

1. Will the changes affect my 25% discount given for me being the only adult resident in my home?

No. This discount is unaffected by the proposed changes.

2. Is the existing capital limit £16,000 per single person and £8,000 per partner in a couple?

No. The amount is £16,000 per claim irrespective of whether it is a single person or a couple.

3. How will my Benefit be affected if I am unable to work but have savings over £6,000?

You will not be entitled to Council Tax Support.

4. How will my Benefit be affected if I am in receipt of Benefit and have savings less than £6,000 but am unable to work?

Your entitlement will be reviewed in the same way as it is now to take account of your change in household income.

5. Will the change in the capital / savings cut off to £6,000 be the same for Housing Benefit?

No. The capital / savings cut off will remain at £16,000 for Housing Benefit.

6. How have you publicised the proposed changes?

We have been visiting the Area Consultative Forums in the Borough, issuing leaflets to representatives of organisations and agencies that attend the service user consultative forum, we have written to advice and welfare agencies, registered social landlords and are issuing leaflets to Council Tax Payers with their bills. We are sending text messages to Benefit claimants where we have a mobile phone number for them and are emailing those with an email address. We are having posters put up at 80 venues around the Borough for 2 weeks from 24th July and have advertised in the Brent

Magazine. We are also meeting with some organisations and groups that may be affected by the proposals.

7. How is Benefit currently calculated?

Income received is compared to a basic living amount set by the Government each year and based upon the circumstances of the claimant's household. Generally, if a claimant has less weekly income than their basic living amount, they will receive 100% Benefit and have no Council Tax to pay. If the income they receive is greater than their basic living amount, the maximum amount of Benefit that they would have been entitled to is reduced by 20 pence for every £1 that their income exceeds their basic living amount.

8. Will the proposed changes apply solely to Brent Council?

No. Each Local Authority will have to set its own scheme. Consequently, there may be different schemes in operation for each Local Authority unlike at present where there is a single national scheme applied to all Local Authorities.

9. It is proposed that the amounts deducted from my Benefit entitlement for other adults resident in my home will be doubled and thus reduce my potential entitlement to Benefit. How am I supposed to pay this additional amount?

The Council has to find a way of achieving the £5.2M savings within the scheme whilst balancing this with the needs of the community and the three key features that the Government has indicated should be addressed within each scheme. The Council has proposed 6 key principles that it believes will help it to achieve this amount. These principles have been proposed for consultation with the community and are intended to seek comments and views from residents and organisation within the Borough to help us to evaluate whether these or other options should be included in the final scheme to be approved by the Council later this year.

10. What if the other adult in my home does not contribute?

This is a matter for the claimant and the other adult(s) resident in their household to address. It is identical to the situation that already exists within the current national Council Tax Benefit scheme. The Council Tax Payer will however retain the legal responsibility for paying the Council Tax for their home.

11. By increasing cuts does it encourage people to go for jobs? I'm better off on benefits aren't I?

The Council will have less money available to spend on supporting claimants in the Borough next year and therefore has some difficult decisions to make. However, there is a commitment to incentivise work and to this extent, we are

proposing to allow claimants to keep more of their weekly earnings without it affecting their Benefit entitlement.

12. Will EPP's still apply? Even with Universal Credit?

No. It is proposed in the draft scheme that extended payments will not be applied to cases where Universal Credit is in payment.

13. I don't think increasing the cuts will incentivise work – we need to train these people and give them the appropriate skills and experience.

The Council is proposing six key changes to the current national Council Tax Benefit scheme although there may be other options that could be proposed and considered. This is why the Council is consulting on the draft proposals and welcomes ideas and suggestions through the consultation process.

14. If I'm a full time worker and get sick can I get CTB/CTS? Will I be covered? Is there an exemption?

There is not an exemption for this but dependent upon your income, savings and circumstances, you may be eligible for some Council Tax Benefit / Council Tax Support. Please contact the Council for advice.

15. Please explain what hasn't changed as well as what has.

The existing national Council Tax Benefit scheme is intended to be replicated by the Council in the new Council Tax Support scheme apart from the changes indicated in the consultation document and set out in the published draft scheme.

16. Does the £6,000 capital limit include cars, televisions, etc?

Cars and televisions do not generally count towards the amount of capital that a claimant has.

17. You are penalising people for saving (then someone in the audience advised them to spend their savings)

The Council is proposing changes to the existing national scheme and consulting on these. The proposals are draft ones only at this stage and consequently any comments and views submitted during the consultation process will be considered and evaluated before determining the final scheme later in the year.

Kingsbury and Kenton ACF

18. Will the changes affect my single person discount?

No. This discount is unaffected by the proposed changes.

19. Will the new scheme have provisions for stopping benefits being paid to residents with ASBO's?

There are no proposals within the current draft scheme for Council Tax Support to be ceased where an ASBO has been issued to a resident in receipt of Council Tax Support.

20. If a non-dependant (i.e. another adult in the home besides a partner or joint owner or tenant) is staying with the claimant in order to save money to buy their own home, how can they be expected to meet their daily living needs if non-dependant deductions are proposed to increase?

The Council has to find a way of achieving the £5.2M savings within the scheme whilst balancing this with the needs of the community and the three key features that the Government has indicated should be addressed within each scheme. The Council has proposed 6 key principles that it believes will help it to achieve this amount. These principles have been proposed for consultation with the community and are intended to seek comments and views from residents and organisation within the Borough to help us to evaluate whether these or other options should be included in the final scheme to be approved by the Council later this year.

21. How can claimants be expected to support their non-dependants and pay the council tax?

The Council has to find a way of achieving the £5.2M savings within the scheme whilst balancing this with the needs of the community and the three key features that the Government has indicated should be addressed within each scheme. The Council has proposed 6 key principles that it believes will help it to achieve this amount. These principles have been proposed for consultation with the community and are intended to seek comments and views from residents and organisation within the Borough to help us to evaluate whether these or other options should be included in the final scheme to be approved by the Council later this year.

22. Isn't the new scheme the same as Poll Tax?

The proposed Council Tax Support scheme is not the same as the Poll Tax. Only the resident owner or tenant of a property is normally required to pay Council Tax unlike the Poll Tax where all adult residents were required to pay unless exempt. The Brent Council Tax Support scheme proposes changes to the level of support provided to claimants from next year but also retains many of the existing features in the national Council Tax Benefit scheme.

Willesden ACF

23. The least able to afford Council Tax are having large increases. Could wealthier people pay more Council Tax?

There is no scope to charge wealthier people a higher Council Tax, other than by the fact that Council Tax is a property-based tax in which those with larger properties are taxed more. The converse, however, does apply to some degree, in that residents on lower incomes can claim Council Tax Benefit / Support which depending on their circumstances may lead to them having a reduced Council Tax bill.

24. Will people in multiple households all have to make a contribution to the Council Tax under the proposed scheme rather than just one?

Under the current scheme all other adults in the household, whilst not liable to pay Council Tax, can have an effect on the amount of Council Tax Benefit awarded – based on an assumed contribution made towards household costs that depends upon the level of that other adult's income. It is proposed that these assumed contributions are increased – the increases take the contributions closer to what the other adults might have had to pay if they were liable for paying Council Tax in their own right.

25. Under the proposed scheme, the savings required are spread across the poorest people. This goes against the original principle of Council Tax whereby those with the largest houses should pay more. You should introduce further bands so that the larger houses pay more.

We cannot introduce further Council Tax valuation bands as these are prescribed by the Government. The £5m savings required are to be found from the money we traditionally pay to claimants as Council Tax Benefit. We have tried to be as fair as possible in spreading the effects of the changes across all of our Benefit customers. However, these are just proposals and that is why we need you to complete the questionnaires and tell us what you think.

26. The budget for this comes from a particular budget. Which department is it?

It is currently funded by the Department for Work and Pensions. Next year, it will be funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government.

27. These changes will require a huge amount of administrative work. Before you implement the scheme, will you go through enough testing to avoid an RBS style sham?

As the new scheme is very similar to the old scheme (with just a few small variations) our software suppliers are confident that the software updates will be ready in time.

Harlesden ACF

28. I am currently on the lowest level of benefits. I can barely afford to buy food. Now I am going to have to pay 20% of my CTAX. How am I going to find more money to pay you?

These are proposals and this is a consultation. We are asking if there any particular groups or persons that we need to consider protecting.

29. If I can't pay the 20% what happens? Will you take me to court?

We are currently investigating new and more flexible ways of collecting outstanding payments of Council Tax.

30. If there are 60,000 more residents in Brent (as per the census) than we are receiving funding for, why doesn't the Council make representations to central government to get more money?

We can't change this year's settlement but we're getting together with nine other Boroughs to make representations for a better settlement next year.

31. Nine councils are representing for a better settlement. Here's a solution: If they don't get satisfaction they should go into deficit.

We are compelled to set a legal and balanced budget otherwise we may be committing an offence.

32. Will the benefit calculation be localised? It is a very complicated system and people do not know, for example, how much discount they will get if they go back to work.

The principle of how someone makes a claim for Council tax Support will generally be the same as at present. Under the proposed scheme, a claimant will still be assessed on their own requirements and they can claim whether they are in or out of work. Customers can ask us to explain how much help they would receive in any given set of circumstances.

33. I work for a homeless organisation. People find it hard to sustain accommodation. What kind of consultation have you done - in particular with those who cannot afford or sustain accommodation?

We have consulted with a long and diverse list of local groups. If there are any groups that we have missed, please tell us and we will try and arrange something.

34. Asking everyone in the house to contribute sounds like poll tax. One of the problems is people may start asking someone (i.e. another adult in

their home) to leave. We need to be careful we do not create a bigger problem as this could lead to more people becoming homeless.

Council Tax Support is not the only proposed change – the impact of the proposed changes need to be considered as part of the welfare reforms as a whole. Taking this into account, customers will need to consider other issues. For example, asking someone to leave a household could have an adverse impact upon their Housing Benefit entitlement. We would therefore encourage customers to talk to us to find out exactly how these changes may affect them.

With regards to similarities with the Poll Tax, under the proposed scheme we are not intending that every adult in a property pays Council tax. We are however proposing that we will take account of the income of other adults in the household where Council Tax Support is paid. For example, an adult son or daughter in the household earning £400 per week would be assumed to make a reasonable contribution towards the household bills for the home and consequently, the level of Council tax Support given would take that into consideration.

35. Have you been comparing your proposed scheme with those of other boroughs?

Every borough is required to establish its own scheme. We have been comparing our proposals with those of other boroughs that have so far made their proposals public.

36. Did you decide your scheme yourself or did you use consultants?

We have used a consultant resource but the proposed scheme has been decided by council officers and members.

37. In terms of consultation, did you start by consulting with those customers that are already in receipt of Benefit? Have you consulted schools? How many responses have you had?

We are making effort to consult with current benefit claimants and other Brent residents. Many of the groups we have consulted do represent existing claimants. We have publicised the scheme, sent text messages and e-mailed existing claimants and sent leaflets out with Council Tax bills. We have not consulted with schools. In terms of responses, to date we have received just under 90.