

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 14 October 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jordan Meade (Chair)

Cllr Baljit Hayre (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
Gurdip Ram Bungar
Sarah Gow
Leslie Hills
Diane Morton
Peter Scollard
Gurbax Singh

Sarah Parfitt	Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight	Head of Revenues & Benefits
Jackie Baker	Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager
Chris Wakeford	Committee Services Manager (Minutes)

12. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Gurjit Kaur Bains; Cllr Ejaz Aslam appeared as her substitute.

13. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview Scrutiny Committee held on 16 September 2021 were signed by the Chair.

14. Declarations of interest

No Declarations of Interest were made

15. Call Ins - Item 'Called In' from the Cabinet meeting of 4 October 2021: Item 9. Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022

The Head of Revenues & Benefits updated Members on the progress made on the review of the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the public consultation on changing the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme from April 2022.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits guided Members through the report and highlighted the following:

- Any changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme have to be agreed at Full Council
- An enormous amount of modelling has been done on the new scheme
- The proposed scheme is not the final scheme and the consultation document is not final consultation document.
- The proposals in the report only affect working age claimants, it does not affect the scheme for pensionable age claimants which is set on a national basis
- One of the most important changes is that under the new Scheme the service would accept claims for Universal Credit as claims for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme as well.
- One of the biggest issues currently is that, every time there is a financial change to a residents claim, a new Council Tax bill had to be issued to them, which means the claimant could potentially receive twelve new Council Tax bills in a year. This is confusing to claimants and is a source of complaint.
- The new scheme is intended to make it far easier for claimants and potential claimants to access.
- The new scheme will simplify how we calculate net income via an income grid scheme. This will provide transparency and show where the claimant fits and what discount they get.
- The new scheme will ensure that any new claimant change of circumstances is effective on a daily basis, instead of a weekly basis under the old scheme.
- The new scheme will be streamlined to bring it in line with Universal Credit, changes include the following:
 - Removal of extended payment provision.
 - Removal of transitional protection
 - Self-employed: minimal income floor will be calculated at a rate of 35 hours per week based on the national minimum wage.
- The Council is still looking to reserve the right for discretion in any exceptional circumstances concerning the self-employed minimal income floor
- The Council is looking to proactively identify cases where people need assistance or are moving into financial crisis and work with them.
- The Council has a statutory duty to consult on any proposed scheme(s) identified by the modelling. It is imperative that individuals and organisations are given access to respond to the consultation. Consequently, the service has devised a stakeholder network map to identify key stakeholder groups
- The consultation will commence for nine weeks on the week beginning the 18 October 2021 and last until 24 December 2021.
- All Claimants will be written to as well as a sample of non-claimants to obtain feedback.
- The Revenues and Benefits team will work with the Communications team in order to ensure that there is an effective campaign across various media channels.
- The consultation will primarily be website based but the Council is conscious of digital poverty and will do everything in its power to get a full solid response that can be analysed.

The Director (Corporate Services), Head of Revenues and Benefits and Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager fielded questions from the Cabinet and highlighted the following:

- A full briefing will be arranged for Councillor Hills, Shadow Cabinet Member for Performance & Administration. The Director (Corporate Services) apologised that this had not been arranged sooner.
- Following the conclusion of the consultation, a final version of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme will be presented to Members.
- Over sixty authorities in the country have followed a similar route to Gravesham but there are subtle differences. The Council has learnt a lot from other authorities.
- The consultation document is in draft form. It is recognised that the document is complex and long and the Communications team are working to put it into plain English
- The consultation will commence next week and run for 9 weeks. The Council would have liked to begin the consultation process earlier but the Revenues and Benefits service has been under a lot of pressure related to the pandemic (e.g. managing 14 different Business Grant Schemes, Test & Trace Self-isolation payments etc).
- Responses to the consultation will be anonymous.
- The Council is working hard to access harder to reach groups and will ensure the consultation is available in a wide variety of languages. The quality of the response is very important.
- The Council will get weekly updates on electronic consultation submissions. Therefore the council will be able to analyse the responses, target areas and discuss any changes before going to Cabinet on 31 January 2022.
- This piece of work is challenging when it comes to resources but the Council does have some external resources to assist. The team are also able to move resources around. If there was a lockdown again then the Leader would be consulted about where priorities lie and the matter would be kept under review.
- Officers noted the following Member suggestions:
 - Question one heading needs reviewing and should be amended to 'I have read the background information above about the Council Tax Reduction Scheme
 - The last bullet point in the consultation should be amended to 'creating operational efficiencies to help assist with the claimant'.
 - On Page 4 of the consultation, a statement should be made that the scheme has been introduced to help residents / make it easier for them.
 - The wording on Q 32. 'Do you have more than three or more pre-school or school age children in your household?' needs reviewing to make it clearer.
 - The word 'options' needs to be reviewed in the consultation
 - The opening paragraph should be simplified.
 - The consultation and associated communications (e.g. video, social media) should be translated into a wide variety of languages including; Punjabi, Urdu, Kurdish, Bengali etc
- The use of the word 'disregard' will be reviewed throughout the consultation document.
- The Council is working with a consultant on the consultation who is providing advice on all areas of the process.

- Net Income mentioned in the report refers to gross earnings minus Tax, National Insurance and pension contribution.
- Capital Assets: if you own a home it's disregarded but a second home will be taken into account.
- Paragraph 2.1.4.2 in the report the Council are saying that instead of changing the change of circumstances every month, the Council will only look at that if moving net income from one Band to another. If it remains in the same Band the Council would ignore that change.
- Paragraph 2.1.4.3 - Legacy Benefits: the Council are proposing to protect recipients by giving the maximum discount of 80%. The Council will in those cases no longer pay claimants an extra 4 weeks as they move into employment.
- The Council will be targeting claimants and doing all within its power to assist them with completing the consultation.
- The intention is that the new Council Tax Reduction Scheme will be cost neutral.
- Detailed modelling has been done on current cases which shows an apparent reduction in overall cost. However, any 'reduction' will be used as a fund to assist those in financial need following the changes to the scheme
- The Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager agreed to provide the Committee with further detail on the 'disregards' outside of the meeting.
- The letter advising of the consultation will not be sent to Kent Care Leavers.
- The Council is trying to maximise engagement and welcomes the help of all Councillors to promote the consultation.

Resolved that the report and consultation be noted and officers take back the positive recommendations made by the Committee and build them into the consultation.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm