



Consultation of Council Tax Reduction Scheme Methodology

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1.0 Introduction

The Government has removed from April 2013, the current Council Tax Benefit Scheme with a localised council tax support to be delivered by Local Authorities. The rationale behind this decision is to reduce the current £4.8 billion annual Council Tax Benefit bill across Great Britain. This will be achieved through a reduction in the overall expenditure attributed to Council Tax Benefit by 10% and shifting the financial pressure from the state to Local Authorities.

Local Authorities currently administer Council Tax Benefit (CTB) in their areas based on national rules set by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Under new management from Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), this devolved power under the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended), changes the current system of awarding a means tested benefit, to a means tested discount within Council Tax administration.

Northampton Borough Council must demonstrate to DCLG, that in order to devise a local scheme, a full stakeholder review has taken place and these people have been consulted on the local scheme, to ensure that the scheme reflects the needs of the community as a whole.

This document will define the principles for effective consultation for Northampton Borough Council in relation to Council Tax Reduction Scheme. It promotes good practice in line with corporate communication in place currently and the Principles of Consultation 2012 written by the Cabinet Office.

This guide will outline the following details;

- The overarching principles of stakeholder consultation and involvements
- Definition of different terms
- The relationship between NBC and stakeholders
- Process for planning a consultation programme
- How the data will be analysed and fed into the decision making
- How the data will be reported
- Commitments of equality and diversity
- Social Inclusion and how to engage with hard-to-reach groups.

Various terms will be used throughout this document. It is therefore essential to ensure that the use of the following terms are understood and the reference that there are used.¹

Consultation: This is a process of dialogue between decision makers and stakeholders with the aim of influencing the policy of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Consultation will only take place where options are available and a decision is required. Consultation will not occur where a resolution has been made.

Involvement: Regular interaction between decision-makers and stakeholders to exchange views to ensure that throughout the whole period of consultation it is effective.

Engagement: These are relationship building activities with stakeholders that enable more specific activity in relation to Council Tax Reduction Scheme, then during the normal course of business for NBC.

Communication: Communication in the context of this code is means that information will be two-way between NBC and the stakeholders. The provision of communication can be by public notices, press articles, publications, web site, and presentations. This vital engagement is essential to the success of the consultation. Communication will be delivered in the best possible method to ensure that engagement is maximised for social inclusion.

¹ These terms have been taken from RTPI Good Practice Guidance on Effective Community Involvement and Consultation 2007. See Appendix 2.

2.0 Principles of Good Consultation

NBC aim to use best practice identified through guidance from Central Government to underpin consultation activities for the localisation of the Council Tax Reductions Scheme. The following principles have been detailed:

Proportionality: Proportionality defines that the time and resource allocation to the consultation phase will be in line with the scale and impact of the Council Tax Support Scheme to its stakeholders.

Inclusive: Some people in the Northampton Community may be socially excluded or face barriers to be able to present their views to Northampton Borough Council. The Council aim to be proactive when consulting on the scheme and demonstrate that we have 'reached' out to these groups to ensure that all opinions are considered.

Genuine: Government legislation emphasizes the requirement to consult early in order for genuine consultation to be effective. With the views of the stakeholders established at the early phase of the scheme development, it will demonstrate that NBC have used the judgment from stakeholders when designing the reduction scheme.

Consistent: Within a political and paid service remit at Northampton Borough Council, a consistency in tone and message is required from all parties to ensure that the correct implication is delivered to all stakeholders during the consultation. Should this fail to occur, it will affect the success of the consultation.

Transparent: As a public body, NBC must demonstrate that all records are maintained and accurate throughout the consultation. All information will be held electronically and subject to Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The Council's Consultation Toolkit was also used for guidance

3.0 Stakeholder Analysis

The definition of a 'stakeholder' is someone or body who is affected by the implementation of Northampton Borough Council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme. It is therefore essential that all stakeholders are identified and are asked to participate in the consultation. This will ensure that changes from April 2013 are communicated to all affected persons and informed decisions can be made.

Stakeholder	Why
General Public in Northampton Borough Council remit	All residents within Northampton potentially affected.
Voluntary Sector and Community	These organizations will be able to give additional information to NBC with regard to recovering the outstanding sums and the level of poverty in NBC catchment.
Precepting Authorities- NCC Northamptonshire Police Authority Parish Councils	Central Government reduction in funding will affect all Major Precepting Budgets. Finance implications therefore will be spread across other services in addition to NBC's current service provision to the public.
Councillors	The scheme must be authorized as part of the Council Tax discount scheme within Council Tax administration. It is therefore imperative that elected members understand the implications of the scheme and the results of the consultation.
Northamptonshire Local Authorities	NBC is keen to explore a countywide policy for CTRS for a consistent and cost effective scheme across

Stakeholder	Why
	Northamptonshire. Engagement with the other 6 LA's will establish a benchmark of additional views to be considered.
NBC Staff	Staff across multiple departments will need to be engaged as the scheme will impact upon current normal business and further business needs may be established.

4.0 Consultation Plan

Consultation is a critical process through the design of the scheme. The underpinning rationale for consultation is the idea that local people will engage with Northampton Borough Council to design a scheme that meets the needs of the community as the business requirements for Northampton Borough Council. The plan has been set out in 4 stages

- Planning
- Activity
- Analysis and Reporting
- Evaluation

Planning

The purpose for this consultation is to meet the legal requirement to consult with the public regarding the change that must be made to the Council Tax Benefit scheme that has been abolished from April 2013.

Each stakeholder defined in the previous section, has been taken from various sources as a gap analysis to reduce the risk of not communicating with all the affected personnel during the consultation process. Against each stakeholder, a method of communication has been identified to ensure that in line with equality and diversion requirements all possible methods of engagements with the stakeholder's covers as many people as is possible during the 6 week phase.

As such this consultation will be shared to the Corporate Communications Section and will be budgeted from Revenue and Benefit resources.

Before consultation can occur, training will need to be arranged for staff or political representatives to ensure that the same communication message is delivered to all.

Any publications that are generated throughout this process will be shown to Corporate Communications and Localisation Programme Board for agreement.

Activity

The public consultation will be 6-weeks long. During this period, engagement with the public will be proactive, ensuring that the time allocated will adequate to the level of customer engagement required. Six weeks has been defined by the Localisation Programme Board as a reasonable level of time to ensure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to have time to reply to the consultation document. This also coincides with aligning this process with the fixed political process for agreement before the Department Of Communities and Local Government deadline of 31st January 2013.

The type of consultation will be through on-line questionnaires (Survey Monkey) on the Northampton Borough Council Website predominately. The questionnaire has closed questions and open questions, to enable an even spread of quantative and qualitative responses. These questions will enable the public to opportunity to give responses in a time efficient and informative manner.

Through the public consultation, various meetings are already in place that Northampton Borough Council conduct through normal course of service provision.

Attendance at these meetings will show that the consultation is actively engaging with minority groups within the community. This is in accordance with the legal requirement Equalities Act 2010-Section 149 and the Armed Forces Covenant (May 2011). Attendance at forums will also provide a face to face opportunity to allow the public to ask questions in real time from a Political and Officer steer.

Should paper questionnaires be completed these, will be recorded on electronically and kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act by Officers to enable on-going monitoring of outcomes. Resource will be allocated from Revenue and Benefit Staff to complete this work.

Communication of this consultation will be made through press statements with the local press, advertisement on the Northampton Twitter Account and Facebook page.

Any communication will be published on the Councillor Newsletter that is published by Northampton Borough Council to the elected members, to ensure that any questions that they may have for their constituents are correctly informed and they have an opportunity to have an active role in promoting this consultation.

A separate e-mail address has been created and will be monitored throughout the whole phase of consultation, extending from the public phase, so ensure that transparency and FIO requests are recorded accurately. This will be managed by Revenue and Benefit Staff. (counciltaxsupport@northampton.gov.uk)

Timeline

Task	Duration	Start	Finish
Engagement with NCFO	239 days	01/05/2012	29/03/2013
Engagement with Portfolio Holder	239 days	01/05/2012	29/03/2013
Engagement with Leader of Council	239 days	01/05/2012	29/03/2013
Consultation Questionnaire completed	31 days	01/08/2012	31/08/2012
Publication Documents	31 days	01/08/2012	31/08/2012
EIA on consultation proposals	31 days	01/08/2012	31/08/2012
Localisation Programme Board	1 day	05/09/2012	05/09/2012
Public Consultation	42 days	10/09/2012	21/10/2012
Multi Agency Forum	1 day	12/09/2012	12/09/2012
3rd Party Sector Meeting	1 day	12/09/2012	12/09/2012
Northampton Pensioner Forum	1 day	13/09/2012	13/09/2012
Northampton LGBT and Q Forum	1 day	18/09/2012	18/09/2012
Northampton Diverse Community Forum	1 day	27/09/2012	27/09/2012
Northampton Disabled People Forum	1 day	17/10/2012	17/10/2012
Analysis of Results	1 day	22/10/2012	22/10/2012
Report of Findings-Include amended EIA	1 day	22/10/2012	02/11/2012
Councillor Connect	1 day		
Cabinet	1 day	19/12/2012	19/12/2012
Audit Committee	1 day	14/01/2013	14/01/2013
Full Council Meeting (CTRS Agreement)	1 day	21/01/2013	21/01/2013
DCLG Cut Off Point for Scheme Design	1 day	31/01/2013	31/01/2013
Cabinet (Annex to Budget report)	1 day	20/02/2013	20/02/2013
Full Council Approval-Budget Setting	1 day	25/02/2013	25/02/2013
General Councillor Briefing	31 days	01/03/2013	31/03/2013

Analysis and Reporting

The reporting of the finding following the consultation will be available in a variety of formats that comply with equality and diversity of the Northampton population. The results will show transparency throughout this process, as Northampton Borough Council will be able to justify that any comments that are provided, have been used effectively when considering the scheme in its entirety and not simply as a process that formally had to be conducted.

A weekly report will be provided to the Director of Resources for discussion with Political steer if required, during the public consultation. This will enable the decision making officers the opportunity to see the responses in a timely fashion throughout the designated period and can define if further consultation is required.

Once the Public Consultation is complete a full report detailing the responses held will be published. This full report will be published to all internal stakeholders and a shortened version will be available to the public on the website and in additional formats as appropriate.

The reporting will identify the level of replies that have been received, the level of responses and the equality information that has been provided to show that Northampton Borough Council has actively communicated with all sectors as far as is reasonable for this consultation.

The Report will be used by Officers of Northampton Borough Council to construct the scheme as defined by all parties for Full Council agreement on 25th February 2013.

Evaluation

As with all consultations, it is beneficial to evaluate the process that was taken and any lessons that can be learnt from the consultation and processes afterwards. Throughout the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Northampton Borough Council must consult annually on the scheme for the following year and therefore it is important that as an organisation, any improvements that can be identified are used to make the consequential contact with stakeholders are implemented.

5.0 Key Risks

Risk	Impact	Reduction Method
Consultation is delayed	High	Part of Localism Programme Plan. Delay of consultation will impact delivery of whole project. Slippage is factor into project plan.
Transparency myth from the public.	Low	Reporting publicized throughout the process of scheme development to keep information flow.
Web document becomes unavailable	Low	External company provides support
Lack of engagement from stakeholders	Low	This is a topic which is highly publicized nationally and locally. Meetings are occurring with CFO and 3 rd party.
Communication with Staff	Low	Welfare Reform Team Leader is attending monthly meetings with Staff from Housing, Benefits, Council Tax and Customer Services
Mixed message from NBC Officers/Political Members	Medium	Meetings are occurring with Portfolio Holder and training will be provided when Public engagement occurs
Legal Challenge to consultation	Low	Adopting principles set out by Cabinet Staff.
Method of Communication	Low	Consideration to NBC equality policy to ensure that all member of the community will be able to take part in consultation.