



TWBC
Town Hall
Tunbridge Wells

1 October 2012

Dear Sirs,

Town Forum Response on Council Tax Benefit

1. You have asked us to comment on the alternatives open to TWBC, now that the Government has decided to delegate responsibility for this to local government.
2. Central government is delegating this issue because there is no easy solution; the reduction in grant from them of 10% ensures that we have to make tough choices. There are two options open to you, viz. a reduction in benefit of 25% or 18.5%.

Whilst the first option will cost less to the Council, the one we think that is least injurious to vulnerable members of the public, is option two: that is the drop in benefit of 18.5%. We believe any shortfall between the sum received from central government and what is eventually paid out by TWBC should be made up along the lines you have suggested: i.e. the reduction in the number of months an empty home qualifies for council tax exemption. We believe it should be reduced from six months to three months. This should be long enough for probate issues to be resolved and also give time for landlords to find new tenants.

3. The Government expects efficiency savings, and we trust TWBC will be able to make some in respect of cost of administration in this area. There is also the opportunity to raise council tax on long term empty properties. If, as we have been told, the number of empty properties in TW is of the order of four hundred, then the council tax being lost from these properties is in the region of £ 500,000 pa. Some of these have been empty for five years. Every effort should be made to find the owners of these properties and recover this tax. If this proves impossible, the Council has delegated powers to take over these properties, find tenants, and thus raise the council tax. There is a shortage of properties for young people in this Borough, and it is a scandal that so many empty properties are allowed to continue to lie vacant. We expect to see a report in a few months' time, setting out the number of properties involved, the amount of council tax being lost and the steps being taken to recover this money.

4. This problem will still be with us in a year's time. Consequently, we should ensure that we are in a position to show that we have done everything in our power to eradicate this empty house problem, and to claw back the money due to us through our own efforts, rather than placing an ever greater burden on the most vulnerable members of our society. Central government has shielded itself from the criticism that will arise when the reduction in council tax benefit becomes public knowledge: we must ensure that the general public can see that we have done all in our power to mitigate its effects on our citizens.

Yours faithfully,

David Wakefield
Chairman