

Collaboration, Strategy & Tactics

for Pensioners Forums, in achieving a replacement for Council Tax

Summary

The Property based Council Tax contributes a minuscule proportion of National Taxation (less than 4p in the £) and a relatively minor proportion of an average Council's income (less than 12p in the £). Virtually all other taxes are "Fair and Affordable", i.e. the more or less you earn, or the more or less you spend, or the larger or smaller a companies profit, then the more or less is the tax that is paid.

It is proposed that Pensioners Forums across the U.K. collaborate in developing a strategy, utilising the membership resources of the Forums, which will result, within 12 months from starting the campaign, in the agreed replacement of Council Tax with a fair and affordable alternative, to be phased in over the next three years.

Small groups, drawn from the membership of the Forums, would develop elements of the strategy, exploiting the financial and legal expertise and experience of the Forum's membership.

These elements would include a detailed, fair, replacement for Council Tax, together with arguments in support of the replacement and against the current system.

A detailed proposal for the replacement of Council Tax has been developed (see Ref 1) and could act as a solid starting point for further development and enlargement. Any further information needed in developing the proposal is easily available from the Treasury or via the Internet.

Also developed would be systems for communication and coordination to ensure that inter-forum policy and action decisions and feedback can be rapidly disseminated throughout the country when needed.

Proposals for coordinated action and publicity would also be developed. This work would benefit from any member's military expertise or experience in organising large groups or events; also any experience in media or publicity.

Having developed the replacement funding proposal and it's supporting strategy, and following presentation of the proposal to both national government and the media, coordinated actions could commence aimed at applying pressure to national government via media and public opinion.

Coordination and synchronisation of these activities across the country will demonstrate the professionalism and determination of the Forums and will achieve maximum publicity.

After achieving a change in Council tax, the united grouping of Pensioners Forums will have demonstrated, to both the Government and to the country, the strength of a coordinated cohesive structure which can then be applied to solving other problems of interest to pensioners.



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Ref 1 : " A Fair, Just and Efficient Replacement for Council Tax ", produced by Taunton & Wellington Pensioners Forum, October 2008.

1) The aim of this document

It is understood that the proposals in this document are not the only way to achieve a better and fairer future for pensioners. No one person, and no one Pensioners Forum, will have all the best ideas, skills or knowledge to solve all the problems.

This document is intended as a collection of brief suggestions which can be further developed or discarded, criticised, built on and improved in order to achieve success.

In order to discuss all aspects of planning and executing a campaign which will achieve it's target, this document concentrates on the problem of Council Tax and the necessary strategy to achieve a replacement.

Most of the proposed strategy and tactics will also apply when planning for improvements in other relevant areas, such as improved Pensions, Healthcare, etc.

2) How to waste everyone's time, influence no one and achieve nothing

Currently various Pensioner Forums and the N.P.C. are campaigning on a variety of issues, in a multitude of towns and cities, on a variety of different dates throughout the year.

The recent N.P.C. campaign, which seems, confusingly, to be aimed more at 'celebrating' the Old Age Pension, rather than protesting at it's meanness, is a case in point.

Since the beginning of the year there have been marches or rallies in Birmingham, Glasgow, London, Bridgwater and other places round the country, all at different times and dates.

A rally planned for Bristol was scrapped for lack of funds needed to meet the Local Authority's requirements for a public gathering. (A 'celebration' is being re-planned in Bristol, possibly to take place in November).

None of this considerable activity was coordinated in any way, resulting in tiny pin-prick effects spread over many months rather than one hard hit on one particular day.

None of this activity achieved national media coverage and very little even achieved local coverage.

Apart from the lack of publicity, this disorganised approach gives the all too correct impression, to the Public, the Government, and particularly all Forum members, of an amateurish and half-hearted approach which will never amount to anything or achieve anything.

3) The fundamental requirements of a winning campaign

These are relatively few, but all are vitally necessary :-

- a) Achievement of communication, collaboration & cooperation between a critical mass of Local and National Pensioners Forums.
- b) A single clear objective, with a target date, agreed by majority decision after discussion amongst all the collaborating Forums, by which to achieve our members aims. (e.g. Achieve, within 12 months of our Campaign Start Date, a binding agreement (from all likely Government Parties), that our proposals for a fair and efficient replacement for Council Tax will be phased in over the following three years..)
- c) A detailed, professionally presented, document which shows how our proposal would be implemented, the resulting costs to the tax-payer and examples of the effects, both good and bad, on various typical individuals.
- d) A complete set of supporting propaganda statements which show why this proposal is the fairest and most affordable. This propaganda would be used when confronted by the Media, Government, etc.
- e) A corresponding set of adverse propaganda which highlights the faults in the current system and which will enable us to shoot down ANY comment, made by politicians or media, in support of the existing unfair system, or against our proposal.
- f) A detailed plan for a rapid and relentless publicity campaign aimed at keeping the issue in the Public eye and forcing the Government into debate over the issue until the force of Public Opinion ensures success.
The campaign must consist mainly of actions that can be carried out by a small number of members at any one location, but with each action coordinated to occur simultaneously across the country.
The plan must include action to be taken to retain media interest when other news intervenes.

All of the above must be in place before launching the campaign, so that the action can be continuous and the media and Government cannot lose interest.

The worst case scenario would be when a detailed document was submitted to both the Government and the media and, after rejection of the document, there was no plan of follow-up action ready to be implemented.

World events would move on and, by the time that the Forums were ready with their next move we would find that some pop-star had married his parrot and no one was interested in our paltry activities.

4) Getting Forums to collaborate and to use their strengths

There will be no substantial improvement in conditions for Pensioners unless there is massive, widespread, coordinated, implacable and unrelenting action in support of change.

Uncoordinated action by individual Forums will achieve little or nothing, but simultaneous action, in a large number of towns and presenting a unified, well planned, approach to a common target, will generate the required media publicity which will then result in achieving the goal. Thus the first requirement when attempting to achieve National change is to take a National approach - involving all, or at least a major proportion, of the U.K. Pensioner Forums.

Getting this message across is the first and most important step in achieving collaboration amongst the Forums.

This message needs to be driven locally by organisations such as the South West Seniors Network and the Somerset Older Citizens Alliance, and nationally by the National Pensioners Convention. If this encouragement is not forthcoming some Forums seem to feel that collaboration is not valid.

With the large membership of Forums across the country there must be a significant pool of skills and experience available to be tapped. A fairly simple questionnaire, sent out with newsletters, could soon pick out useful expertise that could be called on, often for quite a minimal amount of work, in developing or assessing elements of the strategy. Initially it is apparent that Financial, Legal, Organisational, Managerial and Communication skills would be useful. Other skill requirements may well become apparent later, such as Public Relations or Military.

There will always be a problem with apathy of individual members or groups. However, if they know that any effort they are asked to make is working towards a clearly defined and relatively short-term goal, for their direct benefit, this should motivate them.

Forum public meetings should also involve members more, requesting their comment and criticism on clearly defined, focused, topics, so they can see their input contributing to achievement of the goal.

5) Selecting the Big Issue to be tackled

There are many big issues for pensioners, including low pensions, expensive and unfair council tax, health and care issues and crime and fear of crime.

With the current financial situation, together with rising inflation and high heating and food bills, it would appear that the major issue is to get more money into peoples pockets. This narrows the field down to pensions and Council Tax.

Increasing the pension will require "new money", i.e. a rise in general taxation to pay for the increased pension, whereas replacing Council Tax only requires a re-distribution of tax onto those who can afford it and off from those who cannot.

Council Tax is an unfair burden on all low to medium income households, both wage-earners and pensioners. This should ensure a large degree of support, tolerance and encouragement from large sectors of the population for action on this issue.

6) Developing a 'Bullet-Proof' solution

A detailed document has been produced by Taunton & Wellington Pensioners Forum proposing a fair and efficient replacement for Council Tax (see Ref 1 : "A Fair, Just and Efficient Replacement for Council Tax" Oct 2008).

It is not claimed that this document is the last word on possible Council Tax replacement, but it does show the amount of detail needed to present a reasonably convincing case, to both the Media and the Government.

A small group of Forum members, with appropriate skills, could develop this proposal further using the vast amount of information available from the Internet, including Government, Treasury and Local Authority tabulated data. The central funds revenue distribution problem does not appear to have been studied so thoroughly, but there is undoubtedly a lot of research work available on topics like this at some of the country's financial and economic organisations or universities, which could be turned up with a few inquiries. This information could then be further refined, using the expertise of Forum members, to develop a fair, transparent and low-cost method of distribution.

The resulting replacement for Council Tax, and its supporting arguments, must be unassailable when subjected to the criticism and "misinformation" which will inevitably bombard it from both the Government and the media

7) Developing Propaganda in support of the solution

Most of this propaganda will drop out naturally as the proposed solution is developed. Other topics can be explored during "Brain-Storm" sessions by individual Forums or small groups from several Forums. Each major issue must be subjected to a "Devil's Advocate" onslaught so as to be prepared for any eventuality when questioned by the Media or the Government.

8) Highlighting the faults with the current system

A similar exercise must be carried out, with "Brain-Storm" sessions aimed at exposing all the faults with the current system and also aimed at countering any likely mis-information from opponents.

9) Planning the Publicity Campaign

Any protest and publicity actions should be developed on the basis that most participants will not want to travel far from home and will not want to spend a lot of money.

Most activity can take place in each Forum's local town. The key to effectiveness of any action is coordination and timing across the country.

One Forum picketing their local Council office for an hour will not warrant a national headline, but if the centres of 400 or 500 towns across the country were brought

to a standstill for only half an hour at precisely 11 o'clock on the same day - this would interest the national media and worry the Government.

Some protest action could be organised in London. With just a few members from each forum it would be possible to group 4,000 to 5,000 protesters in London.

As noted above, it is proposed that the best overall strategy will be to keep a very low profile until the replacement proposal and any necessary supporting actions have been fully developed and planned.

At this point coordinated activity should commence, with a view to bringing the issue into the front line very rapidly. (a "Blitz-Kreig" approach).

Major events must happen simultaneously across the country to show the government that it is up against a united and organised movement.

Most of the activity must be aimed at central government, since they are the only people who can change overall policy. However, some actions aimed at local authorities may result in pressure up the line in favour of change.

Once again, the membership can be canvassed for suggestions of the type of action to take, using a few public meetings with "Brain-Storming" sessions to cover a lot of ground quickly.

10) Running the Campaign

Planned actions will certainly involve groups of members protesting, also other, clever, publicity raising actions to keep the issue in the media eye.

All these actions need to be " Brain-stormed " by groups of members and Forums.

One of the most important issues is "synchronisation" of events, so communication, both via the Internet and mobile phones, is vital for success. Another important ingredient, certainly in the early stages, is good contacts in local & national media.

Over the last few years many individuals across the country have withheld some of their Council Tax as a protest.

A key point to stress at all times must be that people are happy to pay their way for local services, according to their ability to pay, under a fair system.

At present some individuals and some Forums are withholding, or are proposing to withhold, some or all of their Council Tax for this year or next. Some people refuse to pay any amount above inflation, or withhold the final month's payment. Other people pay with wheelbarrows full of coins, or cheques written on large sheets of plywood.

All this, while showing that quite a few people are prepared to go out on a limb in protest, does not give any impression of a significant, coordinated, movement aimed at scrapping Council Tax.

If, at a very early stage, an agreed replacement proposal was adopted, it would be possible to make a simple information sheet available to anyone who wished to withhold payment. Using this they could pay their Council, via standing order, in twelve monthly instalments of the amount they would pay, for their income band, as defined by the new proposal.

Once again, as this took hold across the country, the unified approach would underline the determination of the protest. Activity should build up with as many members as possible altering their standing orders to pay according to the new proposal.

The aim should be to achieve a critical mass of "fair-payers" so that more and more join nationally and achieve a de-facto change of national government policy, with Local Councils unable to counter the sheer numbers of "fair-payers".

11) Conclusion

It is hoped that this document can act as a starting point towards developing a strategy leading to replacement of Council Tax and the flawed central funding allocation system.

Many of the suggestions, if expanded and developed with contributions from Pensioners Forum members, could produce a workable strategy.

A key requirement for this to happen is united and coordinated action by many Forums across the country.

Once a coordinated network of Forums was in place and had demonstrated it's strength on the problem of Council Tax it could be applied to solving other major problems of interest to pensioners, such as Pensions, Health and Crime.

Once we had won one major battle the Government and Media would regard us with a new respect and future efforts would involve less effort, for even greater rewards.