Local Government and Communities Committee

Consideration of the Council Tax (Substitution of Proportion) (Scotland) Order 2016

Submission from the Liz Albert

1. Overall, do you support the principles of the Government's plans to reform Council Tax?

I support it up to a point, but think it an overly-cautious approach which will not make enough of a difference. The proportional changes will make the system a little less unfair. I would have preferred a change to a different system altogether, for example something like a local tax system. But if we are stuck within the council tax system as it is, I would have liked to see additional bandings being introduced also, above the present top band. As presumably there will not be huge numbers of these much more expensive dwellings, the additional cost of staff time over which dwellings go in those higher bands should not be too great.

I entirely support the ending of the tax freeze on council tax, as it has had an adverse effect on local democracy, and also on council budgets, often affecting the most vulnerable the worst. I do not like the idea of a top limit on annual increases being decided by the Scottish Government. Surely local councillors, using information from council officials, are the ones who should be making these decisions? If not, what are they for? And where is the local democracy?

2. To what extent will the Government's proposed reforms make the system of Council Tax fairer?

It would be somewhat less unfair, but I still feel a more radical change to something like a new local tax system, which would be inherently fairer, would be preferable.

3. To what extent will the changes be straightforward for local authorities to implement?

The Tax Reduction proposals look to me the most administratively complex.

4. Do you support the Government's planned changes to Council Tax reductions?

If we have to be stuck with the Council Tax system, then I can see some justification for this. However, I do not feel people on lower incomes in larger houses should be able to continue claiming this kind of reduction endlessly. There is value in encouraging people to have to think hard whether they need to move to a house in a lower Band. (I am in this position myself - in a family home, that is now somewhat underused.) Maybe a time limit of some kind, possibly 5-7 years, to give people time to look for an alternative. It would be helpful if planning decisions could take into account the need to include a mix
of houses within areas, so that someone like me could find a suitable smaller house on the level nearby to get old in!

5. Please add any other comments on any aspect of the proposed reforms.

I don’t think the Scottish Government should be making the decision about what the increased take of Council Tax should be spent on. My view is that this should be a decision made locally by Councillors, using information from Council Officials.

Liz Albert