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Council Tax Scheme – Consultation Feedback received from Events and Focus Groups.

1. Introduction

As part of the development of the new local Council Tax Support scheme, the Council embarked on a period of 12-week statutory consultation commencing on the 15th August 2012, to find out the views of residents that could be affected by this scheme.

This consultation included a survey, which was available online and hard copy format that was supported by information on the options available. It also included a number of drop in sessions around the district with residents. Meetings have also been held with key partners including CVS and CAB, and other voluntary groups. Two focus groups were also held with 20 members of the citizens' panel. In total the consultation contacted over 4,000 people directly and sent out information through the press and social media across the district. A list of all the consultation carried out is shown in Appendix A.

2. Survey Results

Between 15th August 2012 and 7th November 2012, the Council ran an online and hard copy survey on the options available in designing a new local Council Tax Support Scheme. This survey was promoted through a media launch on the 15th August and was publicised through a further 2 media releases and with regular updates on Twitter and signposting at each of the events highlighted in section 3. The Council received 77 responses of which 50 came online and 27 came in through hard copy. The results of this survey are highlighted below.

Which option do you prefer?

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	Rating Average	Response Count
Option 1 - Adopting the current national benefit scheme and absorbing the cost against current and future budgets.	25	15	25	12	2.31	77
Option 2 - Increase the Council Tax level and/or reviewing discounts to make up the shortfall in funding.	11	13	13	40	3.06	77
Option 3 - A maximum reduction of between 25% and 30% on Council Tax Benefit across all unprotected groups.	15	22	27	13	2.49	77
Option 4 - A targeted reduction by changing the way we calculate Council Tax Benefit entitlement.	26	27	12	12	2.13	77

- Option 4 is the most popular choice with a rating average of 2.13 with 26 out of 77 respondents ranking it number 1.
- The second most popular choice is Option 1 with a rating average of 2.31 with 25 out of 77 respondents ranking it number 1.
- The third most popular choice is Option 3 with a rating average of 2.49 with 15 out of 77 respondents ranking number 1.
- The least popular choice is Option 2 with a rating average of 3.06 with 11 out of 77 respondents ranking it number 1.

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We received further comments from residents as part of this survey and these have informed this report. These are available if requested.

Who responded to the survey?

We had a wide range of responses; the two most popular areas were Swadlincote and Newhall with just under 40% of the total responses. We have also had responses from residents from across the district.

Around 75% of residents who responded were Council Tax Payers and over 30% lived in a household who were in receipt of Council Tax Benefit. Around a third of respondents also received other forms of benefit.

There was a wide age range of respondents, but only 4% were from under 25's with more men than women responding. Over 12% that responded considered themselves to have a disability. The vast majority over 93%, who responded, were White British.

3. Events

The report lists below a description of the key issues raised at each of the community sessions.

Wednesday 19 September – South Derbyshire Partnership Board – held at the Old Post in Newhall.

Attendees – District Council, Police, CVS, Toyota, Burton and South Derbyshire College and Old Post

Key Issues that were raised:

- Suggestions to taper the return to work benefits so to provide a gradual reduction of benefits rather than an arbitrary cut off from all benefit to none.
- All attendees supported the suggested changes around the charges for Empty Homes.

Thursday 20 September – Communities and Equalities Forum – held at CVS Offices in Swadlincote.

Attendees – Framework Housing (supporting 16 to 24 years), Metropolitan Support Trust (Housing Support), ShoutOut Learning Disability Forum, Derbyshire Housing Aid, SOVA (support for people/families at risk of involvement in crime), Staffordshire Buddies, P3 (housing support for people with mental health issues), Reach Young People's Project, Homestart (support for families with children under 5) SDCVS, SDDC Councillors

Key Issues that were raised:

- To be clear which groups will be protected in addition to government directions.
- Mental Health should be included in definition of 'disability'.
- Increase in charges to empty properties supported by all.

Monday 24 September – Citizens Panel Focus Group – held at Council Offices in Swadlincote.

Attendees – Group were a well-informed, cross-section of residents from across the district.

Key Issues that were raised:

- Main areas that people were most keen to see action over were:
 - Empty properties/2nd homes to reduce the non-payment duration and increase the payment for properties empty over 2 years.
 - Including child benefits as income.

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- It was also agreed that whatever solution may be forthcoming, there may still be a need for exemptions to be in operation.
- Understanding that any changes may create increased administration costs and that these need to be managed carefully.
- Understand need to protect the most vulnerable groups in the community.
- Straw poll of options:
 - Greatest number of people felt there should be a mixed solution between Option 3 and Options 2 or 4.

Tuesday 25 September – Citizens Panel Focus Group – held at Council Offices in Swadlincote.

Attendees – Members of the Citizens Panel attended from the following areas: Woodville, Etwall, Bretby, Stenson Fields and Swadlincote

Key Issues that were raised:

- People were most keen to see action over the following areas:
 - Helping people back into work through back to work incentives and provision of additional child care options.
 - No matter how small benefits payments are, everyone should pay something.
- Straw poll of options:
 - Greatest number of people felt there should be a mixed solution between Option 2 and Options 3 or 4.

Tuesday 25 September – Area Forum – Stanton Village Hall.

Attendees – Residents, Members, Parish Members

Key Issues that were raised:

- The changes will hit the most vulnerable people the hardest.
- Support for empty property charges.
- Suggested charging for parking.

Wednesday 26 September – Voluntary Sector Forum – Goseley Community Centre, Hartshorne

Attendees – Homestart (families with children under 5), Umbrella (children with special needs), Enrych (Learning Disability), CAB, Village Games, Metropolitan Support (Housing), Raynauds & Scleroderma Self Help Support Group, Burton Hospital League of Friends, P3 (housing support mental health), iDecide (Housing options for over 55s), Derby Diocese Faith in Action, Framework (housing support 18-24yrs), SARAC (sexual and domestic abuse), SDCVS, Self Advocacy in Action (Learning Disability Advocacy)

Key Issues that were raised:

- Recognition that SDDC is in difficult position and has to do something to tackle this issue.
- Concern that the burden will fall on the most vulnerable people who are already under pressure.
- Concern that people don't know about this and they will be shocked by the bills they receive in April at the same time as introduction of other benefit cuts. Suggestion that SDDC and partners need to plan now for the increase in demand on support services.
- General support for empty properties charges.

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- Need to ensure the burden is spread as thinly as possible, including exploring the possibility of increasing Council Tax.
- Suggest charging for parking came up again.

Tuesday 2 October – Parish Liaison Group – Council Chamber.

Attendees – Members, Parish Members

Key Issues that were raised:

- Concerns that the single person discount scheme was being excluded from the consultation.
- What is the Council doing in terms of NNDR benefit and encouraging people back to work.
- Should remove the exemption and start charging from the first day of occupation following an empty home, particularly with finance repossessions.

Wednesday 3 October – Tenants Forum, Unity Close, Church Gresley

Attendees – Tenant representatives

Key Issues that were raised:

- Concern around the impact of the bedroom tax and universal credit along with reduction in council tax support.
- Welfare benefit cuts are going to affect the same people and these are often the most vulnerable in society.
- Discussion around treating child benefit as an income in the calculation. Some in support but others felt this would again impact on single parent families.
- Concern that when people went back to work, if this did not work out and they would go back on benefits that this would take some time to resolve this claim.
- Definition of disability related to protection of vulnerable groups and how this would be determined particularly around mental disabilities.
- The new support scheme should be as fair as possible across the board and that everyone should pay something towards the savings.
- Some of the group felt that single parents should be protected.

Wednesday 3 October – North East/Melbourne Area Forum – Barrow-on-Trent Village Hall.

Attendees – Members, Parish Members

Key Issues that were raised:

- Looking to see what initiatives to get people back into work are available. This could be through the County Council and Voluntary Sector providers to provide single parents with support through childcare and extending the HB taper to 8 weeks.
- Issue of poor transport links for young people particularly in rural areas. Looking to tackle this through future development.

Wednesday 10th October - Etwall/North West Forum – Sutton-on-the-Hill Village Hall

Attendees – Residents, Council Members and Officers

Key Issues that were raised:

- Concern that any changes would result in an increase in staffing levels in terms of chasing the debt and processing the new scheme.

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- Concerned of the impact of reducing the empty homes charge to 3 month would impact on small developers and housing developments.
- The welfare reform changes and the impact on the lowest paid in communities.

Tuesday 16th October – Swadlincote Area Forum – Goseley Community Centre

Attendees – Residents, Council Members and Officers

Key Issues that were raised:

- This could affect low-income working families as well as those on other benefit.

Tuesday 23 October – Linton Area Forum, Coton-in-the-Elms Community Centre

Attendees – Residents, Council Members, Parish Members, County Members and Officers

Key Issues that were raised:

- Are there enough jobs to enable people to come off benefit?
- Overall support from the room that bringing empty properties back into use would have knock on benefits across the district so we should be looking at all we do to bring these back into use.
- Concern about a rise of the number of claimants over the past 6-9 months. The Council had seen a rise over a year ago but the figure has remained stable over the last 9 months.

Thursday 25 October – Mercia and Repton Area Forum, Milton Village Hall

Attendees – Residents, Council Members, Parish Members, County Members and Officers

Key Issues that were raised:

- General agreement this should be a shared burden and not one shouldered by the 2500 working age people currently in receipt of CTB although this raised concerns about the cost of collection.
- General agreement that empty properties and second homes should be charged more.

In addition to the above SDCVS/SDDC has promoted the consultation as below:

- Funding Fair – Monday 8th October – Ashfield House, Ashby Road, Burton-on-Trent, attended by representatives of approximately 90 South Derbyshire community groups, paper copies available.
- Southern Derbyshire Health & Social Care Forum – Tuesday 9th October – York Road Church, attended by representatives of 40 community groups, paper copies available.
- CVS Newsletter Article distributed to 160 recipients.
- CVS E-bulletin x 2 (16th August and 25th October) to 370 recipients.
- Distribution of survey to clients of direct services as appropriate.

The Chief Executive of the South Derbyshire CAB has submitted the following response:

South Derbyshire CAB strongly support a 3.25% increase in council tax as a first option and only would look to ask people on benefits to contribute as a last resort.

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Further Comments

As a bureau that works on behalf of the local community of South Derbyshire we have consulted with our staff and clients to voice their opinion on the proposed changes.

Option 1

There was a general consensus that this option should not affect public services such as the Police Authority, the Fire Service and Parish Councils who are already suffering due to cutbacks.

Option 2

This appears to be a viable option although the funds generated will not be enough to make up the difference required.

We would support the idea of a full charge being levied to those people with second homes.

We would also support charging council tax earlier where a property is empty or awaiting a major repair.

We would have liked more information on what a smaller increase in council tax would be – for example a 3.2% rise and then add the revenue to be collected from one of the targeted reductions such as the second home rebate and then show the estimated shortfall to maintain current service?

Option 3

We strongly disagree with the option – although the Council is protecting certain vulnerable groups this option would still mean that people already on a low income being hit further.

It would encourage further child poverty and force more people to become financially excluded. To ask a household already struggling and reliant on benefits to find an extra £5.00 per week could cause severe hardship and added pressures. This could result in council tax arrears, bailiff action which in the long run would increase the council costs and recoverability would become more and more difficult.

Option 4

The general consensus on targeted reductions was generally positive but NOT to all; The banded Discount Scheme is a possibility but we would require further information on the amount of households this would affect and who are living in those households. This would generate a big saving to the council and would mean fewer cuts in other areas.

The idea of halving the savings limit seems fair and wouldn't necessarily cause hardship.

We strongly disagree with including Child Benefit as income – this again is encouraging child poverty. Similarly with the child maintenance – this is a very insignificant saving and is paid for the responsibility of a child – no child should have to suffer because of the cuts being made by the government.

We strongly disagree with introducing a maximum limit on the amount of council tax benefit that can be paid: whilst it appears to be a small amount to pay (10%) this would cause severe hardship for the most vulnerable people in society again. Many of the other changes mentioned appear to create small savings but collectively could help.

The suggestion of increasing the taper from 20p to 25p is a possibility but more information is needed to fully assess who this would impact and how many. We felt that there was insufficient information to be able to formulate the available options overall.

4. Equality Impact Assessment

The Council has prepared an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) based on the guidance provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government on the options to be considered. This is available on request.

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Listed below are some of the potential impacts on groups based on each of the 4 proposed options.

Option 1 - Adopt the current national benefit scheme and absorbing the cost against current and future budgets:

- People on limited means will pay similar amounts to what they pay currently in their Council Tax and those with nothing to pay will continue to pay nothing.
- Funding gap will widen each year (as funding reduces over time) having a delayed negative impact on households with limited means. This could impact on the provision of services for vulnerable groups if funding is cut through this option.

Option 2 - Increase the Council Tax level and / or review discounts to make up the shortfall in funding:

- Funding for the pensioner scheme provided, generally, Council Tax payers will benefit from changes to Council Tax discounts.
- All Council Tax payers could potentially pay more to bridge the funding gap.
- People of a State Pensionable Age are exempt and the proportion of older people in South Derbyshire is projected to increase. Liability will fall on the working age population

Option 3 – A maximum reduction of between 25% and 30% on Council Tax Benefit across all unprotected groups

- Achieves the reduction and provides funding for the pensioner scheme, maintaining current benefit entitlement for pensioners.
- Based on current levels of Council Tax Benefit means that about 33% of claimants (approx 2,000 households) would need to make up the difference. This would reduce their current support towards council tax by as much as 25-30% or on average of up to £5 per week.
- People on limited means will have to pay towards their Council Tax and will affect the overall income of each household.
- Wider welfare reform will also introduce negative impacts to some households. It is not possible to quantify at this moment With the introduction of the Benefits Cap and changes to the rules relating to under occupation in social housing- it is not possible to quantify this at the moment because
 - a) DWP data relating to customers who will be potentially affected is out of date and may not be accurate and
 - b) Changes relating to under occupation relates to claimants in social housing and this information is not available at this point in time. The information is currently being gathered over the next few weeks.
- People of a State Pensionable Age are exempt and the proportion of older people in South Derbyshire is projected to increase. Liability will fall on the working age population.

Option 4 - A targeted reduction by the way we calculate Council Tax Benefit entitlement

This option depends on the options proposed. Recent Government announcements mean that some of the potential options are no longer viable or will not now be allowed by legislation.

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Based on the current option being considered

Group	Positive impact	Negative impact
Socio/Economic	<p>The local Council Tax Support scheme would be based on the key features of the current national scheme. Basic benefit entitlement would continue to be calculated on the current parameters, thresholds and allowances as the national scheme.</p> <p>This means people can still apply for both housing benefit and local council tax support at the same time based on similar rules of entitlement until such time as other changes under the Welfare Reform agenda come into force e.g. Universal Credit.</p>	The local Council Tax Support scheme means the 'non-protected' working age claimants of the local scheme would have their benefit entitlement reduced on a straight line percentage or alternatively have to pay a fixed percentage of the headline bill.
Age	All pensioners to be afforded full protection under legislation in all local schemes.	N/a
Disability	The homeowner or dependent within the household who is registered disabled is protected by the local scheme.	N/a
Gender /Transgender		No disproportionate impact.
Marital status		No disproportionate impact.
Pregnancy / maternity	Explore ways of supporting single parent mothers (and fathers) through childcare arrangements or in accessing employment. Signposting to the County Council who offer advice and support associated with childcare arrangements and accessing the financial support that is in place.	Not to protect the current benefit entitlement for single parent families.
Sexual orientation		No disproportionate impact.
Ethnicity		Customers whose first language is not English may not be able to easily understand the changes in the scheme. This will be reviewed to establish if any problems for other members of the community become evident.
Religion / Beliefs		No disproportionate impact.

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A summary of the findings of the EIA is set out below:

- The EIA has enabled the Council to initially assess the impact of all of the principles which will shape the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTSS) following consultation.
- Steps have been taken to minimise hardship and /or help people to budget and make payments at affordable rates
- The Council is considering using its powers to set up a Discretionary Hardship Fund, which would operate on similar lines to the current Discretionary Payments scheme to help householders pay their rent in exceptional circumstances, and an enhanced role by helping households affected to access specialist advice and support.
- The EIA has been reviewed in light of the consultation process and during the development of the final Scheme.
- Steps will be taken to introduce, implement and inform people of the new local Council Tax Support scheme and how they will be potentially affected.
- Need to identify those measures that the Council is going to take in supporting people with the changes and what monitoring will be undertaken to measure actual impacts of any changes to the proposed scheme.
- The adopted Scheme would be reviewed on an annual basis.

5. Themes

Some of the main themes coming out of the consultation are:

- The most popular option from the surveys returned was Option 4 - A targeted reduction by changing the way we calculate Council Tax Benefit entitlement.
- From the consultation process it can also be identified that residents felt that the Council should tackle the issue of empty homes discount.
- Residents also felt that everyone should contribute something towards new scheme. 'The shortfall in funding should be shared as much as possible, i.e. "everyone should pay something". There is positive support for charging council tax on empty homes.'
- 'Concern has been expressed, although there has been an appreciation of the Council's position and that it needs to resolve the issue. Discussion has taken place on other changes to the welfare system and their affect on certain groups such as single parent families and taking into account Child Benefit in assessing entitlement
- General endorsement for a scheme that is designed to recover shortfalls directly associated with the reduction of government funding, after taking reasonable account of any increased in claims and prudent recovery assumptions, but reluctance to support a scheme which could be seen to 'over recover' any shortfall
- The Council to consider some enhanced role in helping households affected to access specialist advice and support. Along with other authorities in Derbyshire the Council has been approached by the Derbyshire Financial Inclusion Partnership for a relatively small grant.
- The Council has the power to set up a Discretionary Hardship Fund, which could operate on similar lines to help households pay their rent in exceptional circumstances

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Appendix A – Schedule of Consultation undertaken – 4146 direct contacts.

What	When	Format	Officer	Venue	Complete	Target
Press Launch	15 August 2012	Electronic/ Online	Carole Warburton	N/A	15/8/12	All Residents through the local media.
General CVS Email Alert	August 2012	Electronic	Pam Wood (CVS)	N/A	16/8/12 and 25/10/12	370 recipients inc Community Groups, Individuals CVS Staff & Volunteers.
Social Media	During the consultation	Electronic	Julia Dowding	N/A	15/8/12 - 7/11/12	All @sddc followers (over 2,000 but not all resident in South Derbyshire).
Targeted CVS Email Alert to specific stakeholders	August 2012	Electronic	Pam Wood (CVS)	N/A	16/8/12	110 groups including CAB Mental Health Association Learning Disability Forum VSF Members.
Volunteer briefing to clients accessing CVS services	August 2012	Briefing	Pam Wood (CVS)	N/A	16/8/12	35 individuals who support hard to reach and socially isolated individuals accessing services such as food parcels.
Direct mail out	September 2012	Mail shot	Julia Dowding	N/A	10/9/12	2000 unprotected claimants.
Direct mail to citizens panel	September 2012	Mail shot	Julia Dowding	N/A	30/8/12	1000 members of the Citizens Panel, residents of the district.
CVS Newsletter Article	September 2012	Paper/ Electronic	Pam Wood (CVS)	N/A	30/9/12	160 recipients inc Community Groups, Individuals CVS Staff & Volunteers.
Media Release	13 th September	Electronic/ Online	Keith Bull	N/A	13/9/12	Residents through the local media.
SDP Board Meeting	19 th September 10.00am start	Presentation	Kevin Stackhouse and Martin Guest	Old Post Centre, Newhall	19/9/12	14 individuals representing key partners across the district.

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What	When	Format	Officer	Venue	Complete	Audience
Learning Disability Forum	20 th September	Hard copy questionnaires	Pam Wood (CVS)	Rosliston Forestry Centre	20/9/12	40 adults with learning disabilities.
Communities and Equalities Forum	20 th September 2.30pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Ray Keech Martin Guest/ Pam Wood (CVS)	SDCVS 48 Grove Street, Swadlincote, Derbyshire DE11 9DD	20/9/12	20 members representing a range of Community and Equality Groups.
Focus Groups	24 th and 25 th September	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Ray Keech Pam Wood (CVS) facilitate	Council Chamber, Civic Offices	25/9/12	17 members of the Citizens' Panel expressing the views.
Newhall/Midway Area Forum	25 th September 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Pam Wood (CVS)	Stanton Village Hall Woodland Road, Stanton, Derbyshire. DE15 9TH	25/9/12	28 attendees at the meeting.
Voluntary Sector Forum (VSF)	26 th September 12.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Ray Keech Pam Wood (CVS)	Goseley Community Centre Hartshill Road Hartshorne	26/9/12	20 individuals representing 15 Community Groups (inc Hard to Reach) and Stakeholder Groups (inc CAB, Money Advice).
Parish Liaison Group	2 nd October 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Martin Guest	SDDC Council Offices	2/10/12	20 Parish Chairs/Clerks from across the district.
Tenants Forum	10.30 – 11.30am on the 3 rd October	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Ray Keech Martin Guest	Unity Close Community Room, in Church Street, Church Gresley.	3/10/12	25 SDDC tenants and residents.

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What	When	Format	Officer	Venue	Complete	Audience
North East/Melbourne Area Forum	3 rd October 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Martin Guest	Barrow-on-Trent Village Hall Twyford Road, Barrow-on-Trent. Derby. DE73 7HA	3/10/12	10 attendees at the meeting.
Funding Fair	8 th October	Hard copy questionnaires	Pam Wood (CVS)	Ashfield House, 218 Ashby Road, Burton-on-Trent DE15 0LA	8/10/12	90 South Derbyshire community groups.
Southern Derbyshire Health & Social Care Forum	9 th October	Hard copy questionnaires	Pam Wood (CVS)	York Road Church, Church Gresley	9/10/12	40 community groups, paper copies available.
North West/Etwall Area Forum	10 th October 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Martin Guest	Sutton-on-the-Hill Village Hall Marlpitt Lane, Sutton-on-the-Hill, Derby. DE6 5JA	10/10/12	21 attendees at the meeting.
Central/Swadlincote Area Forum	16 th October 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Pam Wood (CVS)	Goseley Community Centre Hartshill Road, Hartshorne, Derbyshire. DE11 7HN	16/10/12	20 attendees at the meeting.
CVS AGM	19 th October	Hard copy questionnaires	Pam Wood (CVS)	Repton Village Hall	19/10/12	60 individuals including CVS Members, Stakeholders, Funders and the General Public.
South/Linton Area Forum	23 rd October 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Martin Guest (CVS)	Coton-in-the-Elms Community Centre Elms Road, Coton-in-the-Elms, Swadlincote, Derbyshire. DE12 8HD	23/10/12	26 attendees at the meeting.

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What	When	Format	Officer	Venue	Complete	Audience
Mercia/ Repton Area Forum	25 th October 6.00pm start	Presentation and discussion with hard copy questionnaire	Kevin Stackhouse Pam Wood (CVS)	Milton Village Hall Main Street, Milton, Derbyshire. DE65 6EH	25/10/12	20 attendees at the meeting.
Media Release	13 th September	Electronic/ Online	Keith Bull	N/A	2/11/12	Residents through the local media.

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