

Consultation on proposals to stop the council tax discount for empty and unfurnished homes in Lewes district: consultation report

February 2020

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Background

Between 30 October and 31 December 2019 Lewes District Council invited comments from residents, landlords, private and council tenants and other stakeholders over proposals to stop providing a 100% council tax discount for the first month that a home is empty and unfurnished. This is known as a 'Class C' discount. The changes would take effect from 1 April 2020.

The benefits of proposing this change were stated as:

- property owners would be encouraged to bring empty homes back into use more quickly – the council can help owners find tenants if needed,
- income from council tax would increase,
- the administration costs of processing these discounts would be reduced.

How we consulted

- We carried out a public consultation from 30 October to 31 December 2020.
- We published a page on the council website which included the proposals and rationale for these.
- We provided an online survey for respondents to structure their feedback and made the offer of providing paper copies of this on request.
- We also offered the consultation information in different languages and formats.
- We publicised the consultation through the local media, our social media channels, via the council's website and by email to the council's consultation mailing list.

Who responded

- 177 people responded to the consultation.
- 81% of respondents (141) were home owners or private landlords.
- A response was also received by Wivelsfield Parish Council.

Key findings

- 60% (103) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposals.
- 37.5% (65) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposals.
- When asked 'Do you have any comments on how the proposal would affect you either positively or negatively?' the comments included the following themes:
 - The proposals would not affect me – 42 comments
 - Unfair fair to pay council tax when a property is empty – 15 comments
 - Need to have a month to repair / refurbish a properties and find a new tenant – 15 comments
 - I am supportive of the proposals – 15 comments
 - Good to get properties back on the market – 8 comments






- When asked if respondents have any other comments, these were the most common themes:
 - Agreement with the proposals – 32 comments
 - The proposal is unfair – 22 comments
 - Will help prevent properties from siting empty – 13 comments
 - Exemptions should still be in place in the case of a bereavement / probate circumstances – 11 comments

A full summary of the consultation feedback is available below.

Next steps

These findings will be included alongside a report making recommendations to Lewes District Council Full Council on 24 February 2020. The agenda and papers for this meeting will be available here: democracy.lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=431&MId=2967&Ver=4






Summary of survey responses

1. Which of the following best describes you				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	A partner organisation of Lewes District Council		0.57%	1
2	A home owner or private landlord		81.03%	141
3	A tenant renting privately		5.17%	9
4	Housing Association tenant		0.00%	0
5	Council tenant		4.02%	7
6	Other (please specify):		9.20%	16
			answered	174
			skipped	3
Other (please specify): (16)				
1	A home owner and letting agent			
2	Resident in Lewes District			
3	Private houseowner			
4	Home owner - not a landlord in any way			
5	Lodger			

1. Which of the following best describes you

		Response Percent	Response Total
6	Home owner		
7	Homeowner in another district		
8	Town Councillor - and resident/home owner		
9	Almshouse Trustee, Chair of local Community Land Trust		
10	Citizen concerned about vulnerable people		
11	Individual resident with keen interest in homelessness		
12	A tenant in the house-buying process		
13	Householder		
14	Letting agent		
15	Agent acting for a provider of private rented housing		

2. We are proposing, from 1 April 2020, to stop providing a 100% council tax discount for the first month that a home is empty and unfurnished. How much do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		45.09%	78
2	Agree		14.45%	25
3	Disagree		6.36%	11
4	Strongly disagree		31.21%	54
5	Don't know		2.89%	5
			answered	173
			skipped	4

3. Do you have any comments on how the proposal would affect you either positively or negatively?

Comment themes and frequency

The proposals would not affect me - **42**

Unfair fair to pay council tax when a property is empty - **15**

Need to have a month to repair / refurbish a properties and find a new tenant - **15**

I am supportive of the proposals – **15**

Good to get properties back on the market – **8**

3. Do you have any comments on how the proposal would affect you either positively or negatively?

Benefit to the public purse – 7

It may mean I would increase the charge to tenants - 6

Unfair or distressing in the case of a bereavement – 6

Discount should be offered to private owners (not landlords) - 6

No period for repairs could negatively impact the standard of housing - 6

The proposals could cause hardship for some - 3

Other comments - 19

The following comment was also received from Wivelsfield parish Council:

“Wivelsfield Parish Council strongly objects to this proposal. Councillors noted that the policy makes no distinction between the reasons for which a property may be empty. It was felt that if the owner is making an effort to let the property, sell it, or if the owner has just died, you should not be forced to pay council tax. If the property is empty, no-one is using services to be charged council tax on, therefore it would be more appropriate to have a six month grace period in which no council tax is charged.”

4. Do you have any other comments about this proposal?

Comment theme and frequency

Agreement with the proposals - 32

The proposal is unfair – 22

Will help prevent properties from sitting empty - 13

Exemptions should still be in place in the case of a bereavement / probate circumstances – 11

One month is a fair amount of time to carry out repairs and find a new tenant – 7

Exemption should apply to people redecorating or renovating - 4

There should be penalties for properties left empty for long periods – 4

This won't bring properties back on the market more quickly - 4

The proposal would discourage landlords from redecorating - 4

Exemptions should apply to people buying and selling their own home – 4


Remove the discount for second / holiday homes – 3

Need to consider the impact on vulnerable people - 3

Other comments - 26

5. Where in Lewes district do you currently live?

			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Lewes		24.56%	42
2	Newhaven		12.87%	22
3	Peacehaven		6.43%	11
4	Telscombe Cliffs		3.51%	6
5	Saltdean		1.75%	3
6	Seaford		25.73%	44
7	Barcombe		0.00%	0
8	Bishopstone		0.00%	0
9	Chailey		2.34%	4
10	Denton		0.58%	1
11	Ditchling		1.75%	3
12	East Chiltington		0.00%	0
13	Falmer		0.58%	1
14	Firle		0.58%	1
15	Glynde		0.58%	1
16	Hamsey		0.58%	1
17	Iford		0.58%	1
18	Kingston		1.75%	3
19	Newick		1.17%	2
20	Offham		0.58%	1
21	Piddinghoe		0.00%	0
22	Plumpton		1.75%	3
23	Ringmer		6.43%	11
24	Rodmell		0.00%	0
25	Southeast		0.00%	0
26	South Highton		0.00%	0
27	Streat		0.00%	0
28	Tarring Neville		0.00%	0
29	Telscombe Village		0.00%	0
30	Westmeston		1.17%	2
31	Wivelsfield		1.75%	3

5. Where in Lewes district do you currently live?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
32	Somewhere else (please specify):		2.92%	5
			answered	171
			skipped	6
Somewhere else (please specify): (5)				
1	Uckfield			
2	Seaford			
3	Aldwick in Arun District.			
4	France			
5	Burgess hill			

All respondents skipped the equality monitoring questions.