

# *Isitfair*

## Council Tax Reform

### A non party political nationwide campaign

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#### Meeting with Kent County Council

Tuesday 25 January 2005 at Maidstone, Kent

We were invited to this meeting by Sir Sandy J Bruce-Lockhart OBE, Council Leader and Leader of the Local Government Association ([LGA](#)). His agenda was to 'listen to you and identify common ground'. Unfortunately, Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart was only able to make a brief five minute appearance. We were though, warmly hosted by Nick Chard, Cabinet Member for Finance who spent two hours with us, during which we discussed various issues surrounding council tax.



Sir Sandy J Bruce-Lockhart OBE is a Conservative member for Maidstone Rural East and is also the Council Leader and a Cabinet Member. In addition, he is also the present leader of the Local Government Association.



Nick Chard is a Conservative member for Sevenoaks East, and is also the Cabinet Member for Finance.

'Isitfair' was represented by Christine Melsom (founder), Peter Webb (STAG), Bob Harris (PART), Terry Mullaney (Surrey) and Colin Aiken (Hampshire).

The main thrust of the meeting focussed on the shortfall in government funding, which is the root cause of council tax increases. This was acknowledged and accepted by all. We discussed various funding issues and possible solutions such as the LGA Combination Option, the 'Isitfair' proposal and we also debated the possible outcome of the Lyons Inquiry that follows on from the Balance of Funding Review held last year.

Nick Chard was unable to agree with us on the issue of reforming funding. He made it clear that, from a council's point of view, funding and accountability are inextricably linked and therefore, the ability to raise taxes locally must prevail. We argued that funding and accountability are two separate issues. Councils could be funded entirely from general taxation and national non domestic rates (the Business Rate) and would still continue to remain accountable to their electorate.

It became clear though that the main reason for rejecting our proposal was that there is a genuine lack of trust between Local and Central Government. Local Government do not trust the Treasury to provide adequate funding. In addition, they would not want their budgets to be ultimately under the scrutiny of the Chancellor. They have good reason to take this position as shortfalls in Government funding of Government imposed expenditure are the reason for the recent huge council tax increases.

We then argued that to protect the council tax payer from further excessive increases in their bills, County Councils should join together and go back to Central Government and demand proper funding to cover Government imposed expenditure that is not covered by a commensurate increase in grant. This was firmly rebuffed. It was clear that the mere thought of this was very unpalatable.

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This stance is directly contradictory to Council's claims of wanting to be 'more accountable' to the electorate. It is far easier for them to take the easy option - pass the cost on to the council tax payer. We can only conclude that Council's want to be accountable, but on their terms only. When reminded that they are elected by the people to represent them, this was not well received.

The meeting concluded amicably but it was clear that the only solution the Council would find acceptable is the Combination Option put forward by the LGA.