



GfK NOP Social Research

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Research Report for the Electoral Commission

The
Electoral
Commission

Local authority council tax referendum: referendum question testing

GfK NOP Social Research, December 2011

Your contact:

Polly Hollings (Associate Director), 020 7890 9763, polly.hollings@gfk.com



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1 Executive Summary

A) Introduction

The Localism Act 2011 requires any authority in England which wants to increase tax charge above a certain percentage to hold a referendum on this increase. The government has consulted the Electoral Commission on the question to be used in these referendums. The Commission wished to test two potential versions of the referendum question and contracted GfK NOP to conduct research to test the public's understanding of each question. The research investigated the extent to which voters understood the proposed referendum questions and whether they were able to answer these in line with their intentions.

B) Research approach

- A large scale qualitative approach was utilised consisting of eight focus groups and 86 mini-depth interviews which were carried out with a broad spread of the general public to gather their views towards the proposed council tax referendum question.
- Two versions of the council tax referendum were shown (See pages 7 and 8 of the main report): CLG wording and Alternative wording (developed by the Electoral Commission). These were rotated across the research to ensure good coverage of both versions.
- The research was carried out in Camden, Birmingham, Stockport and Rochford.
- The billing and precepting authorities detailed in the questions (i.e. whether the authority requesting a rise was the authority which sends out the council tax bill or another of the authorities which can charge council tax) were tailored to each location.

C) Interpretation of the question:

- Overall, participants had very low levels of knowledge regarding how council tax is divided across relevant authorities in their local area. Whilst most were aware that their council tax covered a range of services, only a couple of participants knew that their bill was divided between different local billing and precepting authorities.
- On the first reading of the council tax referendum question there was much debate regarding asking for an increase in council tax at a time when the economic climate is a concern. Those most sceptical suggested that the question was seeking to gain agreement on the lower increase by making it look palatable when compared to a higher increase.
- Participants agreed that the lack of information regarding why the authority wanted an increase and how they would spend additional funds meant that they could only base their vote on the impact they felt it would have on their personal expenditure. With this in mind, participants felt that the question was necessarily biased and that accompanying information would help ensure people made an informed vote.
- At a spontaneous level, participants assumed that the council tax referendum was asking for an increase on their entire council tax bill. This view was challenged to some degree

by the inclusion of the phrase 'part of' in the Alternative wording. However, without further information detailing the size of the 'part of', this phrase raised questions from participants.

- When shown some information on how council tax is divided across authorities and the impact this had on the council tax referendum question, participants felt that they better understood the question.
- The information clarified that the council tax increase would be on a proportion of the council tax bill. Participants agreed that the Alternative wording gave the greatest indication that this was the case by including the phrase 'part of'. However, it was suggested that both the CLG wording and the Alternative wording needed to better explain that the increase was in relation to a proportion of the council tax. It was also suggested that the question should indicate the size of the proportion to better clarify exactly what the implication of a 'yes' and 'no' vote would be. The information shown to participants included percentage increases and increases in terms of pounds and participants further felt that an indication of £increase further aided comprehension of the question.
- It should be noted that for some, the concept of the question relating to a proportion of the council tax (depending on authority) was difficult to understand - especially amongst those who were less engaged with council tax or those who found it difficult to interpret percentages.

D) Impact of who is asking for the increase:

- When first reading the council tax referendum question few participants queried the authority asking for the increase and most focused on the personal financial impact that any increase in council tax would have.
- However, it was clear that knowledge of the authority and the perceived role and importance of the authority could play a role in shaping participants' view of the referendum question.
- Participants agreed that they were most likely to look favourably on an increase when it was being asked by an authority that they felt had a large role in their direct local area (e.g. local Council) or, who delivered services that were considered important and evoked an emotional response (e.g. Fire and Rescue Service).
- Once participants had been shown information about the council tax referendum many were surprised about the small financial difference between the two increases - especially for precepting authorities. It was clear that some participants would be prompted to think differently about their vote if they knew more about the authority and the financial impact of the related increase.

E) Question language:

- It was clear across the research that the key barrier to understanding the council tax referendum question was the lack of knowledge regarding how council tax is divided

across the relevant billing and precepting authorities.

- Overall participants felt that the language used in both the CLG wording and Alternative wording was easy to understand. However, there were a few words and phrases that caused some confusion:
 - CLG wording: 'set'. The word 'set' implied to participants that the authority had already decided on the higher increase. This was confusing to participants as they then queried why there was a referendum on the increase, and it encouraged some to question how much choice they actually had on the matter.
 - CLG wording: 'approve'. Phrases that included the word 'approve' in the CLG wording were problematic for some participants. Firstly, these participants felt that 'approve' was an odd choice of word when 'agree or disagree' would be a clearer and more familiar way of asking the question. Secondly, the phrases including 'approve' were felt, by some participants, to have a negative tone and felt like they were providing a 'caution' about what would happen if a 'yes' or 'no' vote was given.
 - CLG wording: 'financial year'. Whilst only problematic for a small number of participants, it was agreed that if 'financial year' was used it should be accompanied by an explanation of this e.g. as given in the CLG wording; 'beginning on 1st April 20xx'.
 - Alternative wording: 'part of'. When noticed on first reading the question, 'part of' raised questions amongst participants and created confusion about what 'part of' meant. Once participants had been provided with information about the council tax referendum, this phrase made more sense. However, participants felt that this could be further clarified by indicating the size of the proportion of council tax the question was referring to.
 - CLG wording and Alternative wording: use of percentages. For some participants the use of percentages was confusing - especially for those who were not used to interpreting percentages. When shown information about the council tax referendum participants were positive towards the inclusion of £increase in the explanation and felt that it would be easier to understand the financial implication of the question if this was included. However, it was agreed that this would be difficult where the £increase would differ across council tax bands. Whilst participants noted that this £increase was probably too difficult to include in the question they did feel that this type of information would be important to provide to voters.

F) Question structure and layout:

- Participants found the structure and layout of the Alternative wording clear and easy to follow. This was because the implication of a 'yes' and 'no' vote was clearly laid out on separate lines.
- Whilst the CLG wording was considered shorter it was clear that participants had to work harder to derive the 'yes' and 'no' vote implications.

G) Suggested changes:

- It was clear across the research that participants' lack of knowledge regarding how council tax is divided was the biggest barrier to understanding the question. With this in mind the research suggests that the following information be clarified and provided:
 - The implication of 'yes' or 'no' vote. Participants suggested that the Alternative wording best presented the implication of a 'yes' or 'no' vote by separating these on two lines of the question and that this structure should be used. In addition to this, the research suggests that the word 'set' be changed to remove the perception that the decision has already been made in favour of the higher increase.
 - How council tax is divided across authorities. Whilst the phrase 'part of' went some way to indicating this in the Alternative wording, participants agreed that more information needed to be provided to explain that the question was referring to a proportion of the council tax and what size this proportion was.
 - Financial impact of the increase. Once participants were shown information informing them about the proposed increases, some were surprised about the small financial difference between the two increases requested; especially where the difference for some authorities was as little as £4 per year. They felt that expressing the increase in pounds would better aid comprehension of the actual increase and that knowing this could mean they would be more likely to vote in favour of the larger increase.
 - Reason for the increase. It was clear that participants wanted to make an informed choice on their vote but felt unable to do this without further information about why an authority was asking for an increase and how these funds would be used.
- Across the research there were a number of suggestions for how additional information could be provided to people. Many suggested information through the post but noted that this would need to be addressed to a named individual as it could otherwise be considered 'generic junk mail'. Others felt that information could be sent alongside voting cards or that information could be displayed at the polling station.



2 Introduction

2.1 Background

The Electoral Commission is an independent body established by the UK Parliament under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). Its aim is to maintain the integrity of and public confidence in the democratic process. Under PERA, the Commission is required to comment on the intelligibility of referendum questions at a UK, national and regional level. The Local Government Act 2000 requires the Commission to be consulted on the intelligibility of questions used in local referendums on changing the executive arrangements of local authorities.

Parliament has recently passed the Localism Act 2011. Under this Act, any 'relevant authority' in England that wants to set an 'excessive' increase in its council tax charge must hold a referendum on this increase.

The Department for Community and Local Government's consultation paper on local referendums to veto excessive council tax¹ outlines the 'relevant authorities', which are:

- Billing authorities: London borough councils, district councils, unitary county councils, Common Council of the City of London, the Council of the Isles of Scilly.
- Major precepting authorities: Greater London Authority, non-unitary county councils, police authorities, fire and rescue authorities.
- Local precepting authorities: town and parish councils, chairman of a parish meeting, charter trustees.

In addition to holding the referendum, each relevant authority will need to prepare supporting factual material to be sent to council taxpayers. The relevant authority would be prohibited from campaigning on the issue. The referendum franchise will extend to all local electors. The Electoral Commission asked GfK NOP to conduct research to:

- Test the intelligibility of the proposed referendum question amongst members of the public.
- Inform the Electoral Commission's recommendations on what information should be provided to people so that they can answer the referendum question(s).
- Inform the Electoral Commission's recommendation as to how this information should be delivered.

¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1657699.pdf>



2.2 Objectives

The research investigated the extent to which voters understood the proposed referendum question and whether they were able to answer the question in line with their intentions. Specifically, the research aimed to:

- Identify whether any elements of the referendum question proves problematic for users in the context of the Commission's question assessment guidelines
- Explore the reasons behind these problems
- Explore potential ways of redressing the problems
 - Through changes to the question
 - Through other channels of information

The research required us to identify which information was required to aid people's understanding of the referendum question itself, and also to explore what information people would need access to in order to be able to answer the question.



2.3 The Referendum Question

The research tested two potential versions of the referendum question. One was the question wording proposed by the Department for communities and local government (CLG) – this is referred to as the CLG wording throughout the report. The other was wording devised by the Electoral Commission to stimulate discussion and test potential alternative wording – this is referred to as the Alternative wording throughout the report. These different versions of the question were tailored to list billing and precepting authorities relevant to the four research locations. Resultantly, different percentages were included in different mock ballot papers across the research. A table detailing the percentages used is provided in the appendix.

Question 1: CLG wording:

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
_____ has set a council tax increase of x% for the financial year beginning on 1st April 20xx. If voters do not approve the increase then the council tax will rise by y% instead.	
Do you approve the increase of x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>



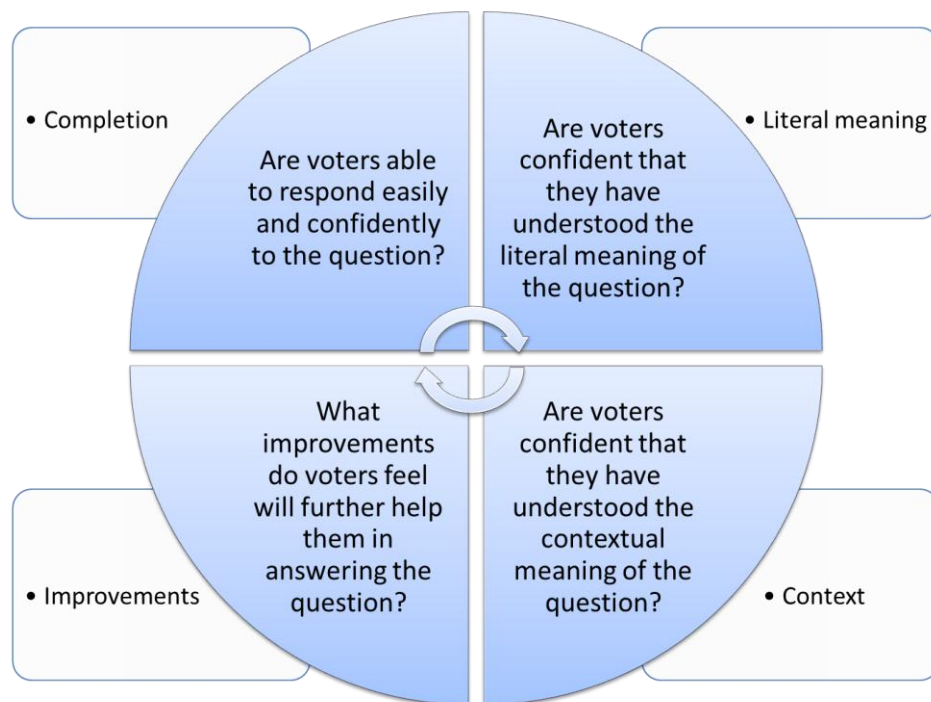
Question 2: Alternative wording:

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
Part of the council tax in your area goes to _____. _____ wants to increase the amount it charges from 1 April 20xx by x%. If most voters choose 'yes', the increase will be x%. If most voters choose 'no', the increase will be [y%][zero]. Do you want _____ to increase its council tax charge by x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

2.4 Research Approach

2.4.1 Method

A qualitative approach involving 8 focus groups and 86 mini-depth interviews was used. A qualitative approach enabled the research team to fully explore how participants interpreted and responded to the question, as well as allowing opportunity to fully investigate participants' understanding of the literal and contextual meanings. Specifically, the contextual understanding focused on peoples' existing knowledge of council tax and the perceived implications of a 'yes' and 'no' vote to fully explore whether they understood the question and how this understanding affected their response to the question. The research also identified how any issues in understanding the question could be addressed.



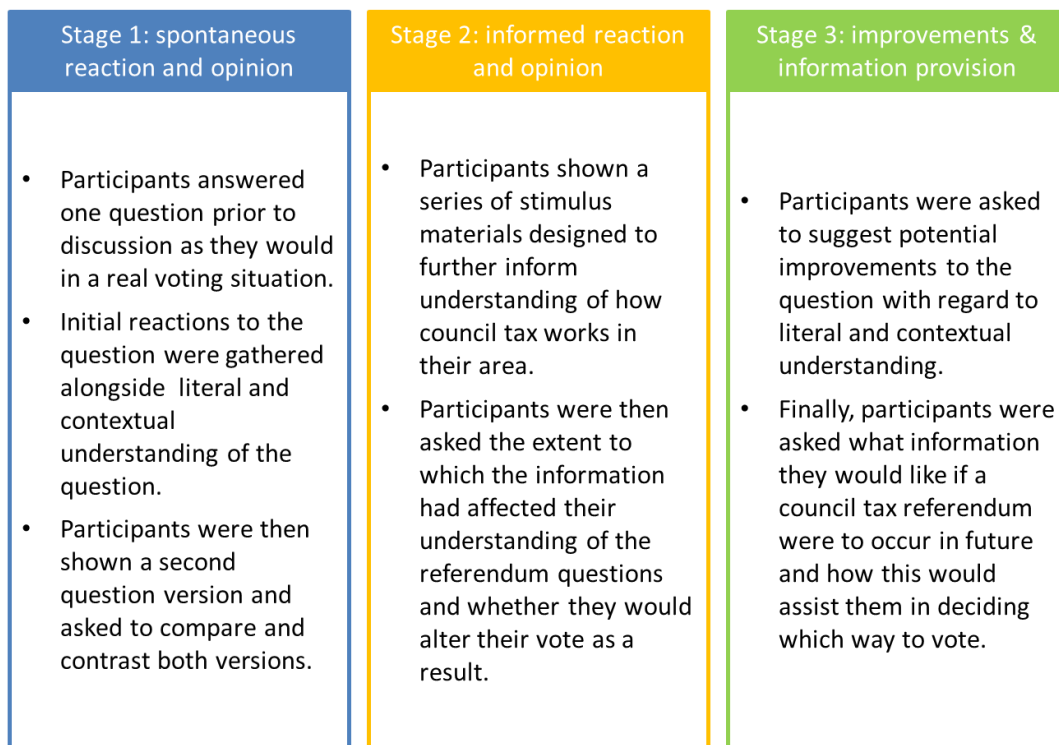
The approach of focus groups and mini-depth interviews was used to gather a wide range of feedback.

The mini-depth interviews provided a private forum for discussion and so were the ideal way to robustly test the strengths and weaknesses of the question from an individual participant's point of view. Participants were able to be open and honest about what they did and did not understand about the question in terms of both literal understanding and also their contextual understanding and interpretation of what the question was asking them.

The approach used focus groups in conjunction with depth interviews to gather nuanced feedback around the question as well as being an ideal setting for generating ideas for

improvement. Focus groups generate a discursive environment where participants feed off the ideas of others and therefore generate much more nuanced feedback than a depth interview discussion where only one point of view is provided.

Whilst full discussion guides are provided as an appendix to this report, the diagram below highlights the main topic areas that the research addressed.



Question rotation

As shown in section 2.3 two versions of the question were tested across the research. In the focus group discussions participants were shown the CLG wording first enabling us to give prominence to the CLG wording, and then evaluate this alongside the Alternative wording. The number of mini-depths (86) provided scope for good rotation and the versions of the question were rotated across these.

2.4.2 Sample

Overall 8 focus groups and 86 individual mini-depth interviews were conducted. The research took place across four locations between the 16th and 23rd November 2011. The sections below outline the types of people we targeted in the research.

A) Focus groups

The eight focus groups lasted 1.5 hours and included 5-8 participants – the focus groups included a total of 55 participants.

Group	Key quotas: (all groups with mix of gender and SEG)	Location
1	Age: 17-24 years Voting: Always/ usually vote Bill paying: Mix of bill payers/ non bill payers	Stockport
2	Age: 25+ years Voting: Sometimes/ never vote Bill paying: CTB claimants	Stockport
3	Age: 25+ years Voting: Always/ usually vote Bill paying: Non-bill payers	Birmingham
4	Age: 45-59 years Voting: Sometimes/ never vote Bill paying: Bill payers	Birmingham
5	Age: 60+ years Voting: Always/ usually vote Bill paying: Bill payers	Rochford (Essex)
6	Age: 25-44 years Voting: Sometimes/ never vote Bill paying: Bill payers	Rochford (Essex)
7	Age: 25-44 years Voting: Always/ usually vote Bill paying: Bill payers	Camden (London)
8	Age: 17-24 years Voting: Sometimes/ never vote Bill paying: Non-bill payers	Camden (London)

Voting behaviour

Groups were separated by people who had previously always or usually voted in local authority elections, and those who sometimes or never vote in local authority elections. In the case of young people who had previously been ineligible to vote, this went on how likely they were to vote in the next local election.



Council tax payment

Groups were separated by:

- Council tax payers: People who were solely or jointly responsible for paying their council bill.
- Non-council tax payers: People who were not responsible for paying their council tax. For example, people who live with their parents or students amongst others.
- Council tax benefit claimants.

Demographic characteristics

Age: Two groups were specifically aimed at younger people aged 17-24, two groups were aimed at slightly older voters aged 25-44 with two further groups focused on older voters aged 45-59 and 60+. The remaining two groups were held with people aged 25+ with a spread of ages included in each.

Socio-economic Group: With the exception of the council tax benefit claimant group (2) who fell into the C2DE SEG categories, the remaining seven groups included a spread of SEG across BC1C2DE.

Ethnicity: People from ethnic minority communities were included across the sample to reflect the local area.

B) Mini-depth Interviews

The original aim was to conduct 80 interviews across Stockport, Birmingham, Rochford and Camden and the final number achieved was 86. The table below shows the overall numbers achieved. A full quota breakdown of the exact quotas achieved can be found in the appendix.

Bill paying	Voting behaviour	Total	
Payers	Voters	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of interviews achieved in each area ranged from 17 in Stockport to 26 in Birmingham. • 40 men and 46 women were interviewed. • Age bands were divided into 17-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-59, 60+. The interviews were mostly evenly spread across the age bands with slightly more 25-34 year olds interviewed than other age bands. • Participants were recruited from across SEG bands with a heavier weighting towards C2DE. The interviews achieved were B (16), C1 (17), C2 (9), D
	Non-voters	13	
Non-payers (including 10 x CTB claimants)	Voters	24	
	Non-voters	24	

<p>Total: 86 interviews</p>	<p>(26) and E (18)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 participants identified themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority • There was a spread of family and housing status across the research.
<p>Hard to reach groups</p> <p>Within the above interviews we also targeted the following specific hard to reach groups to investigate how they understood the question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 people with English as a second language - 6 people with low levels of literacy - 6 disabled people (3 people with learning difficulties, 3 people with visual impairments) 	

2.5 Strengths & Limitations of the Research

Utilising a qualitative research approach to explore how people responded to the council tax referendum question allowed researchers to gather rich insights into the way people interpreted and understood the question. The insights generated were further increased by using a combination of mini-depth interviews and focus groups. Whilst the mini-depth interviews simulated a real voting experience and gathered individual views, the focus groups created a discursive forum where the question was debated and evaluated.

The main strength of this approach was that it allowed participants to give their views on the referendum question in an open and spontaneous way. While the discussions followed a clear structure, participants were not required to limit themselves to multiple choice answers and responses during the focus groups and mini-depth interviews were full, rich and nuanced. In addition, by using a combination of mini-depth interviews and focus groups, the research benefited from both individual responses and collective discussion, which enabled researchers both to simulate voting conditions and generate suggestions for change.

However, there are limitations to the approach used. Qualitative research emphasises self-expression and insight over numerical outcomes and therefore relies on detailed discussion with a relatively small sample; although the research was carried out with a range of people this sample cannot be considered representative of the general public. The findings reported in this document focus on how easy participants found it to understand the CLG wording and Alternative wording versions of the referendum question and provide suggestions for improving its clarity. They do not attempt to say what proportion of the sample found different aspects of the question difficult to understand or what proportion of voters would benefit from the changes suggested.



3 Current awareness and understanding of council tax

Across the research it was clear that there was limited understanding of how council tax is currently divided between authorities. There was some knowledge that council tax covers a range of different services but this knowledge tended to be piece-meal and varied across different participants.

Those with the most knowledge of council tax were bill payers who had read information they had received in the post alongside their council tax bill. This was only a few people across the research and tended to be older participants (60+ years) or participants who had moved into their local area relatively recently and had been keen to read all documentation from their council.

There was some recall of recent local press coverage regarding council spending cuts and some participants mentioned local services in their area that they knew had been affected by cuts – such as library services. Whilst this press coverage had provided participants with information about which services were funded by their council, in some cases it had led to negative feelings towards the council which impacted on their feelings towards the referendum question.

Overall, there was mixed understanding of a referendum. Whilst most had heard the word some noted that they were not sure what it meant.

"The word referendum – I've heard it. But normally they're talking about it in that room where they're all lined up on those seats." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

4 Interpretation of the question

The two versions of the council tax referendum question (CLG wording and Alternative wording) were rotated across the research to ensure that different questions were seen in different orders by participants. Participants were shown a selection of different mock ballot papers² (featuring both billing and precepting authorities) to comment on at a spontaneous level before being shown some further information about council tax, and an explanation of a council tax referendum.

4.1 Spontaneous interpretation of the question

First view of the council tax referendum question (regardless of version shown first) sparked much discussion and debate. On observing participants complete the ballot paper many re-read the question a couple of times – which they later explained was to ensure they had fully understood the question. However, once they had decided on their vote participants appeared confident that they had answered the question as they would wish to.

Overall initial response to the question was negative, and focused on the increase in council tax which was immediately linked to an increase in personal expenditure.

"You relate it to your own personal outgoing so do you want to pay 4.9% or 3.5%? They are the only choices, so you would probably default it to a 'no'."
(LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

The current economic climate featured in many participants' reaction to the referendum question. Participants were keen to note that they felt it was a sensitive time to be increasing council tax and envisaged that very few people would be inclined to vote for the higher increase.

"The problem is that it is set in this context where we have got the banker scandal...I think a lot of people think there are better places to get that money...I don't see how you can phrase that question in a good way." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Across the research participants felt that the referendum posed a simple question; how much of a council tax increase they agreed to. With this in mind, most felt that the question was a "no brainer" and found it difficult to envisage anyone opting for the higher increase.

"It's just human nature to go for the lower increase and they know people are going to do that." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"[It is like asking] do you want your car tax to be £190 a year or £290?" (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

² Please note: different mock ballot papers were used across the different locations. Resultantly the research tested different % increases. A table of these can be found in the appendix.



"Obviously if you have the option to spend less money then you are going to go with that." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

However, some were suspicious about the perceived simplicity of the question and worried that they had read the question incorrectly.

"I felt I must be missing something...because I don't think anyone would want to increase it by more, so am I reading it wrong?" (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

Alongside this there was a great deal of suggestion by participants that the question was a "trick question". With this in mind many stated that they had re-read the question a number of times looking for the "catch" as they could not understand why the question was being asked when it seemed obvious to them that people would instinctively vote for a lower increase.

"I felt suspicious about it. You look at it and it's almost one of those sort of questions that if you put the obvious answer – which is no – you're actually approving of something else." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"Because it's to do with money and council tax and stuff people are a little bit suspicious, that's what makes you read it twice." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

Many participants were sceptical about the council tax referendum question and were keen to remark that they felt that there should not be any increase. The absence of a 'no increase' option further fuelled their scepticism.

"I didn't want to tick either box, they should have another box for if I don't agree with any of it." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

The most sceptical participants felt that the question was designed to gain agreement from members of the general public to some kind of increase. They felt that the question aimed to make the lower increase look palatable when compared to the higher increase.

"It's automatically setting you up not to go for the higher figure." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"We're being manoeuvred into voting for a 4.5% council tax increase, basically." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"It is a classic tactic as well, this. It is going to go up by 4.9% and if you say no then it is 3.5%." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"What governments usually do is say they want to put it up by 10% when they really only want to put it up by 5% so when they put it to 5% everybody's happy." (LA non-voter, council tax benefit recipients, Stockport)

There was strong suggestion across the research that the lower increase was the figure that the authority seeking to make the increase was looking to achieve.

"I reckon the person that potentially wrote that question as far as the council was concerned probably wanted 3.5% all along. But they're giving the voters an opportunity to...have a say in what the council do." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"I would imagine that they are happy with 3.5% but they are trying to slip in the 5.2%." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Only a couple of participants across the research had heard that the government could apply a cap on council tax. These participants assumed that the lower figure in the referendum was the capped amount.

"I think that legally they can only put it up by 4.5%." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

A) Desire for more information

Across the research participants felt that they lacked information regarding why the authority was requesting an increase.

"I don't know why it is going up to 5.3% or 3.5% - I would like to know why. Apart from that, I thought the question was straightforward." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"They didn't really tell us what else they're going to do with that money." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"Well, I'd want to know where it's going...I would question why they want to increase it." (LA non-voter, council tax benefit recipient, Stockport)

"What the difference is going to...you know, what other services you're going to get for that other 3.5%." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

It was agreed that this type of information – detailing how money would be spent and the impact on local services – was crucial to being able to make an informed decision on how to vote. Without this information participants felt that the question was biased towards a 'no' vote as they would only be able to judge the impact of the vote in personal financial terms.

"It is not telling us how it would affect us...we would have less money in our pocket but we might be better off in other areas, but it is not telling us." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"You don't know what it is offering for the increase, it is not made clear anywhere." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)



"You would be more inclined to vote yes if you knew that it was going towards something that was handy for you or taking your bins more often or something like that." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

B) Understanding the financial impact of the increase

When looking at the CLG wording at a spontaneous level, participants assumed that the increase was in relation to their entire council tax bill regardless of the type of authority asking for the increase.

"That's the whole thing isn't it, that's the whole of the poll tax with everything included." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"Oh say you're on £1,000, so 4% [increase] would be £40" (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Consequently participants assumed that the increase would be a significant increase in money.

"I think anyone who read that – and I bet we've all done the same – we've all said no because it looks like they want an awful lot more money." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

When reading the Alternative wording there was mixed reaction to the phrase 'part of'. Some participants did not notice this phrase and therefore felt that the Alternative wording was asking the same as the CLG wording – an increase on their entire council tax bill.

Where participants did notice the phrase it led to discussion and some confusion. Some felt that 'part of' added detail to the question which they felt was unnecessary and assumed that regardless of this information they were being asked about an increase on their entire council tax bill. Others were confused by the phrase and queried where the rest of their council tax went.

"It says part of council tax in the area goes to Rochford District Council, where does the other part go?" (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Across the research only a few people thought that 'part of' suggested that the question was asking about a percentage of their council tax.

"I am getting hung up on the fact that in the first one [CLG wording] it says Greater London Authority has set a council tax increase which infers that it is a total council tax increase. Whereas this one [Alternative wording] clearly starts off as saying it is a part. So 4.9% of 10% allocation may not be mad whereas if it is a 90% allocation, the 4.9% goes up." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"It indicates that the part of the money that the Greater London Authority takes from Camden Council could go up to 4.9% and not your council tax as a



whole will increase by 4.9%." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Those who did think that 'part of' referred to a proportion of their council tax commented that the question lacked detail regarding the size of this proportion.

"It's still not telling you what part though; it could be 4.8% of 98%." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

However, for a couple of participants the phrase 'part of' suggested that the Alternative wording version of the question was asking about allocation within the current council tax provision.

"If I put that into money terms...So I pay £10 council tax. Essex County take £2, now they want to take £3." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

This was only raised by a small number of participants. One participant further noted that the Alternative wording did not explicitly say that the council tax they pay was going to increase and resultantly felt that the question was asking for agreement for changing the current allocation of funds.

"There's nothing saying here [Alternative wording] that my council tax is going to go up. It's the county council wants more of what I pay already." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

4.2 Informed interpretation of the question

Once participants had spontaneously discussed their understanding and views towards the question they were provided with information regarding council tax and a council tax referendum (please see the appendix for a copy of this information).

Most of the information shown to participants was new information that they had not previously been aware of. Some had been vaguely aware of the fact that council tax was divided across different services but none were aware of how this division worked, and the impact this had on a council tax referendum. Whilst some found this concept easy to understand others struggled with the concept – this tended to be people who were less engaged with the subject of council tax and unfamiliar with understanding and reading information with percentages and figures.

However, the information was considered useful and participants felt that it provided them with two key facts. Firstly, the fact that the increase was on a proportion of the council tax:

"You're not actually having an 8% or a 4% increase on your council tax. You're only having it on a small proportion of your council tax." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Secondly, it provided them with an indication of the financial impact of the increase:



"You can answer the questions a lot more. You know what it's going to cost you." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"Knowing this now, the cash amount makes a huge difference when you know the scale." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"So it's not the whole council tax that's going up, it's just the part that they get...so although it says 8% seems like a lot, when it comes down to it, it really isn't that much." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"5.2% sounds really, really different to 3.5% but it is only like a tenner." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

A couple of participants felt that this information would genuinely make them reconsider their vote.

"When you suddenly realise that 15% is only going to be some paltry – like £4.50 a year, you suddenly think well, why not? Let them have a bit extra." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"I still wouldn't vote yes but I would be more likely to vote yes now I know that it is only a percentage." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Once participants had been provided with this information they were asked to revisit the referendum questions and comment on whether they felt they were clear and easy to understand.

When reviewing the CLG wording participants felt that the question lacked clarity regarding the fact that the increase would be on a proportion of the council tax. Whilst it was agreed that this was implied by stating the specific authority requesting the increase, participants strongly felt that nobody would spontaneously know how council tax was divided across different authorities.

"It needs to definitely be clearer that only a part of it is increasing and not your full whack." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"A lot of people wouldn't know what the percentage was in the first place unless they were told." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"These questions, when it says Camden Council, you would assume it is your whole council tax. You wouldn't realise that there are separate areas to it." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"Do you approve of the 8%? It still doesn't say exactly 8% of what. Is it 8% of the whole pie or 8% of your slice?" (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

When reviewing the Alternative wording participants focused on the phrase 'part of'. They felt that they were now able to put this phrase into context and therefore felt that this version of the question went further than the CLG wording in indicating that the increase was related to a proportion of the council tax. However, again, they strongly felt that without this contextual information regarding the division of council tax across authorities, this phrase would still be likely to cause confusion and that the relevance of the phrase would be missed entirely. With this in mind participants felt that it would be important to specify the percentage of the council tax that the authority received.

"Would it help if they said what percentage it was...then you know it's a small percentage." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"How about if it said 'The Greater London Authority takes 24% of the total council tax you pay. They want to increase that percentage by 4.9%'?" (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

There was some debate amongst participants regarding the idea of adding another percentage to the question. Some felt that this would make the question too confusing, especially those who tended to struggle with or be unfamiliar with interpreting percentages. In response to this some suggested that the percentage be expressed as a fraction to help aid peoples' understanding.

"You could say Greater London Authority makes up a quarter of your council tax and they want to increase this by this much or by this per cent." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"Maybe go with a fraction in there, like an eighth." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Overall, participants were clear that to fully understand the question and make an informed vote they would need to know more contextual information and this should clearly explain that the question relates to a proportion of the council tax. Further suggestions for how this could be achieved are detailed in section 8.

4.3 Impact of who is asking for the increase

Across the research the different versions of the council tax referendum question shown to participants included a range of different authorities including the billing authority for the local area and a precepting authority. The range of different authorities included in the research is shown in the table below. Given the number of different precepting authorities in Rochford, and in order to cover a wide range of such authorities across the sample, two precepting authorities were shown across the focus groups and mini-depths in this location.

Camden	Billing authority: Camden Council Precepting authority: Greater London Authority
Birmingham	Billing authority: Birmingham Council

	Precepting authority: West Midlands Fire and Civil Defence Authority
Stockport	Billing authority: Stockport Council Precepting authority: Greater Manchester Police Authority
Rochford	Billing authority: Rochford District Council Precepting authority 1: Essex County Council Precepting authority 2: Hawkwell Parish Council

On first reading of the council tax referendum question few participants spontaneously queried the authority requesting the increase. The key focus of the question was the amount of the increase.

"You're not looking at who it goes to, it's the percentage." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"It's not very clear they are different entities...the Greater London Authority and the council. You don't realise they are two different bodies...instantly you go to no, whoever they are." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

However, after further discussion of the question it was clear that knowledge of and the perceived local importance of the authority could play a role in shaping participants' view towards the council tax referendum question.

Camden participants had generally low knowledge of the precepting authority – the Greater London Authority. Based on the name of the authority, some were confused over whether the increase request would be for Camden only, or for the whole of London.

"Who are the Greater London Authority?" (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"It says Greater London so does that mean the whole of London is having the increase or is it just Camden?" (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Amongst Camden participants the Greater London Authority was seen to have less local relevance when compared to Camden Council. It was clear that they would be more likely to vote favourably for an authority that they felt had local impact.

"When you see Camden you know you live in Camden and when you see Greater London you don't think it is going to immediately affect you." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"You think that it is going to benefit you in a way because it is Camden Council and you think they would be looking out for services to benefit you in your



area. The Greater London Authority is putting a blanket over London.” (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Impact on local area was also an important factor under consideration when participants in Rochford looked at the different authorities requesting a council tax increase.

“Essex is a wide, wide area whereas Rochford is our local; that would affect us directly.” (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

“If you’re thinking about your local parish council and you’re theoretically more involved with it...you’re affected more by the things that occur in your area.” (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

It should be noted that the billing and precepting authorities in Rochford all included the word ‘Council’ (Rochford District Council, Essex County Council and Hawkwell Parish Council). This led to some confusion and many who saw the word ‘Council’ assumed that it was talking about their local Council.

Participants in Birmingham and Stockport highlighted the importance of understanding the role of, and services provided by a requesting authority. In these locations the Police authority and Fire and Rescue service were considered to be important services. This resulted in some participants feeling more positively towards an increase linked to these services.

“I put yes at first because it’s the police...but then I put no, because it’s not explained good enough [where the money is going]...really I don’t know what I’m saying yeah and no to, so I put no to be on the safe side” (LA voter, mix of responsible and not responsible for paying council tax, Stockport)

“Because it’s about the fire and civil defence it does make people think about it more.” (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

In Birmingham it was clear that the West Midlands Fire and Civil Defence Authority evoked some emotion regarding the life-saving role of fire fighters. This positive association was seen as something that could encourage people to look on the increase more favourably.

“It arouses more emotions, you hear so much about the cuts.” (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

It should be noted however, that initially the authority name ‘West Midlands Fire and Civil Defence Authority’ caused some confusion and some associated ‘Civil Defence Authority’ with the Armed Forces.

Conversely, where participants had negative views towards the authority they were less likely to feel favourably towards the increase.

“You’d be more likely to say no to this one [billing authority] than the last one [precepting authority] because Manchester Police benefits from that one and you think they might need it – but Stockport Council? What do they need the



money for?" (LA voter, mix of responsible and not responsible for paying council tax, Stockport)

Although the type of authority requesting the council tax increase could have some impact on participants' views towards the increase most participants remained focused on the financial implication of the increase on their personal expenditure.

Once participants had been informed about and seen some information regarding a council tax referendum they were better able to understand the financial amounts of money involved in the proposed council tax increase. Some were surprised at the small amounts of money being requested by some authorities and this, combined with the perceived importance of an authority, could make some people feel more favourably towards the increase.

"This one makes me change my mind about voting yes or no because it only seems like £4 something and I think if that extra money is going towards firemen and police who are out there risking their lives every day to protect the public – they always need more money." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

4.4 Multiple questions

During the research process participants were informed that the referendum could include multiple questions.

At a spontaneous level the idea of multiple questions highlighted the misperception that the council tax referendum question was asking for an increase on the entire council tax bill. Participants tended to add together the percentage increases asked about on different questions (e.g. billing authority and precepting authority) and assumed that these would equal an overall increase on their council tax. For example, in Camden participants added together the increase from Camden Council (5.2%) and the increase from the Greater London Authority (4.9%) and assumed that if both questions received a 'yes' vote the increase would be 10.1% on their entire council tax bill.

At an informed level participants still found the idea of multiple questions confusing. The idea of calculating the different percentage increases was considered difficult and whilst many accepted that multiple questions could be likely it was clear that most participants lacked confidence in determining what the financial impact of this would be.

When thinking about multiple questions a few participants noted that seeing the different authorities side by side could result in people comparing which authority they would prefer to give an increase to. By way of example, in Camden some felt that people would be more likely to look favourably on the request from Camden Council as it was perceived to have more local relevance when compared to the Greater London Authority.

"Someone might be more inclined to vote for their local council for yes because they want to improve the area they live in directly, and they might not



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go out of Camden much and vote no for the Greater London Authority.” (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

5 Question language

It was clear across the research that the key barrier to understanding the council tax referendum question was the lack of knowledge regarding how council tax is divided across authorities. Overall, participants felt that the language used in both the CLG wording and Alternative wording was in Plain English and easy to understand. Some participants used the words "simple" and "basic" to describe the question. It should be noted that in line with the rest of the sample people with low literacy levels and learning disabilities did not find the words used in the question difficult to understand. Although there was some suggestion that longer words and phrases such as 'financial year beginning' could be simplified. Again, for these participants the key barrier to understanding the question was in understanding the concept of council tax division across different authorities and the impact of this on the proportion of council tax being increased.

Across the research only a few words and phrases were identified as problematic – these are discussed below.

A) CLG wording: 'set'

For the CLG wording, a word that was often cited as problematic was 'set'. Participants agreed that the word 'set' suggested that the billing or precepting authority had already decided on the council tax charge for the next financial year and the result of the referendum would not affect the amount it would increase by. The word 'set' was strongly disliked across the research and fuelled scepticism about the purpose and outcome of a referendum. Those most sceptical felt that voters did not have any choice over the increase, and that it would rise by the higher percentage regardless.

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
_____ has <u>set</u> a council tax increase of x% for the financial year beginning on 1 st April 20xx. If voters do not approve the increase then the council tax will rise by y% instead.	
Do you approve the increase of x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

"Birmingham council has set a council tax increase so it's as if they've already made their mind up about it. It's as if they've said we've already decided it's going to be 4.8% because we've set that." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"What I don't understand is they have already set this 5.2% so it is not a referendum as to is it 5.2% or 3.5%. It is already going to be 5.2% from next year." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"If someone says that they've set something I'd think that that was what's happening...it's not saying 'are considering a 4.5% increase'." (LA voter, mix of responsible and not responsible for paying council tax, Stockport)

"Either way it's going up, they make the decisions before they even ask the question." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)



"It's got a bit here – have set – they've set it...they've already made their minds up." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Those less sceptical understood that a majority 'no' vote would result in a lower increase in the council tax charge but felt that the word 'set' was confusing and misleading.

"This 'set' is the driving force isn't it? You read that and you think they've set a rate." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

In particular, some participants felt that the word 'set' was contradictory to the remainder of the question and queried why there would be a referendum question if the charge really had been set.

Changing or removing the word 'set' was considered to be a key improvement to the CLG wording. Words such as 'considering' or 'proposing' were given as suggested alternatives.

"If they said they are considering a council tax increase...that would have been better." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"The word 'set' in the first sentence, like it's not been proposed, it's set already." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

When compared to the Alternative wording participants agreed that the Alternative wording made it clear that the referendum was giving people a choice about the increase. The word 'set' in contrast raised queries about whether the referendum would actually affect the final council tax increase.

"Here [Alternative wording] they want to increase it, on the first question [CLG wording] they are going to do it." (LA non-voter, council tax benefit recipients, Stockport)

In summary, it was clear from the research that the word 'set' should be changed or removed to avoid raising queries and concerns that the council tax increase has already been set and fuel scepticism that the outcome of the referendum will have a limited impact on this.

B) CLG wording: 'if voters do not approve the increase'

There was a mixed response to the phrase 'If voters do not approve the increase' used in the CLG wording. Whilst some participants felt that the phrase was neutral, others felt that it had a negative tone. In particular, some felt that the phrase had an overly authoritative or cautionary tone. In this respect some participants felt that they were being led towards a 'no' vote because it was strongly highlighting that a 'no' vote would result in a lower increase.

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
_____ has set a council tax increase of x% for the financial year beginning on 1 st April 20xx. <u>If voters do not approve the increase</u> then the council tax will rise by y% instead.	
Do you approve the increase of x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>



"They're pushing it for 3.5% by frightening you with 15%." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"It leads you on to say no really...because it says 'if most voters do not approve'." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

Some felt that the phrase was very "final" and "terse" in its tone which led to people feeling like they had less of a choice with this question.

"This second sentence [in the CLG wording] 'the voters do not approve the increase in council tax to rise by 3.5%' – it is very final. It is like...we don't really have a choice whereas here [in the Alternative wording] it is 'if most voters choose, the increase will be 4.9%'. It just feels like you have got a bit more of an option." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Finally, there was some discussion about the use of the word 'approve'. Participants felt that it was an odd choice and suggested that 'agree or disagree' could be used instead. 'Agree or disagree' were more familiar to people within this context and participants felt that this would clarify what the question was actually asking.

"When they wrote 'do not approve' I think they could probably make that clearer...they could say 'in agreement with' or 'vote against it' or something a bit clearer." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Reaction to this phrase was mixed but it was clear that it did prove problematic for some participants. For those who felt most strongly about this phrase they felt that the tone was placing a negative onus on the voter (if voters do not) and leading them towards a 'no' vote. This suggests that this phrase should be restructured or changed to make it feel less like a 'caution'.

For others the word 'approve' just seemed like an odd choice when they felt that other words such as 'agree or disagree' could be used and would be clearer. This suggests that the word 'approve' should be changed to avoid any lack of clarity.

C) CLG wording: 'do you approve the increase'

Again, the word 'approve' was met with mixed reactions in the phrase 'Do you approve the increase' in the CLG wording. As already noted, for some participants the word 'approve' was disliked and seen as an alternative way of saying 'agree or disagree' which was considered more familiar and clearer.

"Approve is a bit vague...on the other one it said 'do you want' which is normal language, day to day language." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
_____ has set a council tax increase of x% for the financial year beginning on 1 st April 20xx. If voters do not approve the increase then the council tax will rise by y% instead.	
Do you approve the increase of x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Some cited that they found this phrase negative in tone and felt that it was leading them to vote 'no'; this view was often based on participants' belief that when given the two options, people would always vote for the lower increase. For some participants 'do you approve' just felt like a strange way of asking whether they agreed with the higher increase and wondered why the word 'agree' had not been used. Some participants noted that the phrase 'do you want' – as used in the Alternative wording – gave a greater sense of choice to the question.

"It is saying wants, and wants gives you more choice. So they are actually giving us an option." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

However, some participants were positive towards this phrase stating that this made them feel like they had control over the amount their council tax charge would increase; that they were being asked for their approval.

"[It] sounds like we're giving the go-ahead rather than them telling us that we're going to do it." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"I think it's putting more emphasis on the person voting to actually really think about what they're doing...the word approve." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

As discussed above, the research suggests that the word 'approve' has potential to confuse people and lead to questions regarding the impact of their vote. The research suggests that the word 'approve' should be changed.

D) CLG wording: financial year

The phrase 'financial year' was mentioned by a couple of people as a phrase they did not fully understand.

"The financial year; I didn't know when that was." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Resultantly, participants were positive towards the explanation of this within the CLG wording.

"The way that they've put 'financial year beginning' and told you the date. Usually they just say the next financial year. And I don't know what that is, so I quite like that." (LA non-voters, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Across the research there was no strong feeling about the inclusion of 'financial year' in the CLG wording. The research suggests that including this term will not be problematic if the explanation accompanies this (beginning on 1st April 20xx).

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
_____ has set a council tax increase of x% for the <u>financial year</u> beginning on 1 st April 20xx. If voters do not approve the increase then the council tax will rise by y% instead.	
Do you approve the increase of x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

E) Alternative wording: 'part of'

As discussed in section 4.1, on initial reading of the Alternative wording, the phrase 'part of' was not always noticed. Where it was noticed it often led to confusion regarding what 'part of' meant, and for most participants it tended to raise additional questions and queries. Some wanted to know what proportion of their entire bill went to the named authority and which other authorities received a proportion of the council tax revenue.

"People are going to be going 'well what do you mean by that, where is the rest of the money going?' And I thought it all went to Camden Council anyway." (LA voter, council tax benefit recipient, Camden)

Vote only **once** by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice

Part of the council tax in your area goes to _____.
 _____ wants to increase the amount it charges from 1 April 20xx by x%.

If most voters choose 'yes', the increase will be x%.

If most voters choose 'no', the increase will be y%.

Do you want _____ to increase its council tax charge by x%?

Yes

No

Once participants had been informed of how council tax is divided across authorities, and the impact this had on the council tax referendum question they suggested that whilst 'part of' did indicate that the question referred to a percentage of the council tax, it did not fully explain this. Participants felt that an indication of how large 'a part' would be an important inclusion to the question.

"Part of' could be anything. 'Majority' makes sense." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"Part of' is too ambiguous...it can be any amount so I think saying the majority of the council tax is better than saying part." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"Perhaps if it said it is a proportion of the council tax." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Inclusion of this phrase in the question vastly depends on whether people will have more knowledge regarding council tax division before they vote. On the basis that this is not a fixed variable the research suggests that in isolation the phrase 'part of' has potential to confuse people. However, clarifying that the referendum question relates to 'part of' the council tax bill was considered of key importance across the research. Giving further detail or an indication of the size of this 'part of' is likely to increase understanding of this phrase.

F) Alternative wording: 'it/ they/ name of authority'

Across the research three different options for the second sentence of the Alternative wording were tested:

1. [It] wants to increase...
2. [They] want to increase...
3. [Name of authority] want to increase...

Option 1 – 'it' – was met with a negative response. Participants felt that it was not clear who 'it' was referring to, and some further felt that it was not a proper use of English.

"The 'it' should be changed to Camden Council." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"It is not clear what 'it' refers to." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

When it came to options 2 and 3, there was no strong feeling about the use of these across the groups. A couple of people noted that option 3 resulted in quick repetition of the authority name but did not feel that this was problematic or impeded their understanding of the question. A couple of participants felt that option 2 – 'they' could lead to some uncertainty about who it was referring to. These participants suggested that the first two sentences be linked with the word 'and' to make it clear.

"You've only got to put 'and' they want to increase the amount they charge." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Overall the research suggests that 'it' should not be used in the question wording but that 'they' or 'name of authority' are unlikely to drive any confusion.

G) CLG and Alternative wording: 'voters'

The word 'voters' caused some confusion amongst a couple of participants who were non-voters and lacked an understanding of how a referendum would work. These participants tended to focus on the word 'voters' and queried what would happen to their vote if they did not turn up to vote. They expressed concern that if they did not turn up to vote their vote would be counted as a 'yes' vote for the higher increase.

"They want 8% and if you don't approve or if they don't get enough people to come out and vote no they're going to increase it to 8%." (LA non-voters, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Vote only once by marking a cross (X) in the box next to your choice	
Part of the council tax in your area goes to _____.	
_____ wants to increase the amount it charges from 1 April 20xx by x%.	
If most voters choose 'yes', the increase will be x%.	
If most voters choose 'no', the increase will be y%.	
Do you want _____ to increase its council tax charge by x%?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

However, it should be noted that this confusion applied only to a couple of participants. Most participants did not find this word problematic suggesting that changing this word in the question wording will have limited impact.

H) CLG and Alternative wording: use of percentages

Across the research some participants noted that they found it difficult to think in terms of percentages. These participants tended to be unfamiliar with using percentages in day-to-day life and this view was particularly expressed by those with low numeracy levels and those with learning disabilities.

"I feel like you're at school, you know, it just feels like a bit of a question that I'd face in a test at school." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"Even if I did get my calculator out I'm rubbish at maths and I don't think I could [work that out]." (LA non-voter, council tax benefit recipient, Stockport)

When paying close attention to the percentages used in the question, a couple of participants were keen to note that the Alternative wording mentioned the higher increase more frequently than the lower increase and this felt that the question was biased towards the higher increase.

"It is not very clear and the 4.9% is mentioned three times here and 3.5% is only mentioned once. They are really pushing 4.9% and they are not really explaining that this might be in your benefit." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

When participants were shown the information about a council tax referendum they were interested to see the monetary value of the increases. Some felt that these were easier to personally relate to and understand when compared to percentages.

"I do think it is good when they say actual monetary value of the increase because percentages are kind of arbitrary because 5.2% sounds huge – and £50 is a lot [but I] don't know what number I was expecting but for some reason I thought it would be a lot bigger than that." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"Pounds is always your bottom line isn't it? Everyone wants to know what pounds they're going to have to pay extra. Not a percentage of something." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

When they considered whether the council tax referendum question could really include monetary amounts participants agreed that this would be difficult to do based on different council tax bands. However there was some suggestion that any supporting information provided to voters prior to the vote or at the polling station could give some example monetary amounts. Some further felt that this type of information could be included in the paper itself although recognised that this could make the question complicated.



"Maybe you could say if most voters choose yes the increase may be on average between x and y pounds or if most voters said no the increase may be between x and y pounds." (LA non-voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Overall, participants were keen to see some indication of the monetary financial impact of the increases but did not feel that providing this within the question itself was essential. They expected to be provided this in an alternative format before they voted.

6 Question structure and layout

In general, participants noted that the CLG wording was shorter than the Alternative wording and therefore more concise. Some participants liked that the question was short – two sentences in length.

"Short and snappy; to the point." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Whilst some participants did voice a preference for the CLG wording it became clear that this was based on it being the shorter question and that their main understanding of the referendum question was derived from the stimulus material that detailed the division of council tax.

Some participants commented that they had to work harder to understand the implications of a 'yes' and 'no' vote when reading the CLG wording.

"The [CLG wording] one was short, but I had to read it seven or eight times to understand it whereas this one [Alternative wording]...is set out easier." (LA non-voter, council tax benefit recipients, Stockport)

Across the research participants found the layout of the Alternative wording clear and easy to follow. In particular, most participants commented that they found the division of the implications of the vote into 'yes' and 'no' statements helped them to clearly understand the impact of their vote. Whilst they agreed that the CLG wording included the same information as the Alternative wording, they preferred the way that the implication of the vote was split into two sentences in the Alternative wording.

"It's spaced out so you can easily see the outcome of both responses...it's clear so you can consider both possibilities." (LA voter, council tax benefit recipient, Birmingham)

"You've got if most voters choose yes, or if most voters choose no. It makes it quite plain." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"It's [Alternative wording] clearer because it's separate paragraphs." (LA non-voter, council tax benefit recipients, Stockport)

"It gives you options...it feels much more like a choice." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

"This one's easier to read, it says what they are proposing and what the two outcomes will be." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

It was often commented that the spacing between the implications of the vote, the quotation marks around 'yes' and 'no' and the alignment of the percentages meant the question was clearly structured and made it easy for participants to read.

For both versions of the referendum question, a few participants described how their attention had been drawn to the final sentence highlighted in bold text at the end of the question. For a couple of participants this meant that they had skim read the rest of the question and focused on the final sentence. For both the CLG wording and the Alternative wording this meant that a couple of participants had overlooked the information detailing what the outcome of a 'no' vote would be.

*"If you just quickly skimmed over the top bit and answered the question...you wouldn't even realise that you are going to get 3.5%...you might just go to the question and say 'no' not realising that you are going to get 3.5% anyway."
(LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)*

Mini-depth interviews were carried out with people with learning disabilities and low literacy levels. Some felt that the CLG wording was "jumbled up", with the single paragraph making it difficult to read. Most felt that the layout of the Alternative wording made the question "simpler" and "easier to understand" when compared to the CLG wording. This was largely due to the division and spacing of the implications of the vote into 'yes' and 'no' statements.

Mini-depth interviews were also carried out with people with a visual impairment. These participants noted that being able to use a large print version of the question was important.

Across the research some participants queried whether asking for a 'yes' or 'no' vote was the correct approach. Some felt that as the council tax referendum question was asking people to choose between two percentage increases people should be asked to vote for 'x%' or 'y%'.

*"Do you want to pay 8% council tax or 4.5% council tax? Please tick one box."
(LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)*

*"It is saying do you vote yes or no for an increase? If you vote yes it increases and if you vote no it increases anyway. It is not really a yes or no question. It is a how much question."
(LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)*

*"It's clear but to be purist about it I think there is an unnecessary use of the words yes and no because really the question should be 'what increase do you prefer 3.5% or 4.9%'."
(LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)*

These participants felt that this would clarify what the vote was asking and make the implication of the vote entirely clear.

For a couple of participants the Alternative wording had also indicated that the question was referring to 'part of' the council tax. However this was only the case for a couple of participants and tended to raise questions and queries about what 'part of' related to.

7 Overall fit with assessment guidelines

The Electoral Commission question assessment guidelines are as follows.

The question should:

- Be easy to understand.
- Be to the point.
- Be unambiguous.
- Avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another.
- Avoid misleading voters.

A) Easy to understand

Overall, participants felt that the question was easy to understand in regards to the literal interpretation of the language. However, when looking more closely at the language used in the question participants identified some words which they felt lacked clarity and could introduce confusion to their understanding of the question:

- CLG wording: 'approve'. Phrases that included the word 'approve' were met with mixed reaction. For some the word 'approve' was not familiar and participants queried why 'agree or disagree' had not been used instead; they felt that this would make the question easier to understand.
- CLG wording: 'financial year'. Whilst 'financial year' was explained within the question a couple of participants queried what a financial year was. In this respect, having the explanation alongside the term was important to ensure that the question was easy to understand.
- Alternative wording: 'part of'. Whilst in itself this phrase used simple language, it did raise some queries and questions when read at a spontaneous level. Participants felt that this phrase only became truly easy to understand once they understood how council tax was divided.
- CLG wording and Alternative wording: use of percentages. Whilst percentages were not considered to be problematic by most, some participants did find that these could be confusing especially among those unfamiliar with interpreting percentages. When participants were shown information about council tax division and the implication of a council tax vote they noted that they found the actual financial increases (£) easier to understand than the percentage increases.

The layout and structure of the question also affected how easy to understand participants found the question. It was clear that participants found the Alternative wording version of the question to be easier to read and understand as it detailed the implications of a 'yes' and 'no' vote on separate lines.

B) To the point

Overall participants noted that the CLG wording was shorter and some felt it was more concise when compared to the Alternative wording. However, as previously discussed, the layout of the Alternative wording was felt to be clearer. With this in mind, although longer, participants felt that the Alternative wording was also to the point and that all of the information provided was important.

C) Be unambiguous

When reading both of the council tax referendum questions at a spontaneous level participants felt that they were posing a simple question and were confident that they had given the response they wanted to. However, once participants had been given more information about the council tax division and the impact this has on the questions, participants agreed that the question lacked clarity regarding the proportion of the council tax the questions referred to. It was agreed that the questions could be made clearer by adding further detail about the proportion of the council tax under consideration, or by ensuring that people had access to appropriate information before making their vote.

In particular, the phrase 'part of' raised confusion and further questions for participants who felt that this needed to be further elucidated in the question. Although participants were better able to understand this phrase once they had been shown explanatory materials, without this contextual knowledge then 'part of' raised more questions than it answered.

D) Avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another

At a spontaneous level, participants felt that the council tax referendum was necessarily biased as they had no information about why a council tax increase was being requested. In particular, participants agreed that they would only be able to vote on the basis of the impact the increase would have on their financial expenditure. In this respect they felt that people would be biased towards voting 'no'. It was suggested that further information regarding the rationale for the increase would enable people to make an informed choice.

When looking at the different authorities asking to increase the council tax it was clear that attitude towards the authority could also drive a bias towards the question; but this was not based on any aspect of the question wording or layout.

Finally, there was some discussion that phrases using the word 'approve' in the CLG wording had a negative or cautionary tone. Whilst this view was not expressed by all participants it was clear that some felt that this tone was encouraging people to vote 'no'.

E) Avoid misleading voters

Across the research it was clear that lack of information about council tax division and the implication this had on the council tax referendum question misled participants to think that the questions were asking for an increase on the entire council tax bill.

Thinking specifically about the question wording, participants felt that the word 'set' used in the CLG wording was misleading. This word was considered misleading as it suggested that the higher increase had already been decided upon.

8 Suggested changes

8.1 Understanding the question

Across the research it was clear that the key barrier to understanding the council tax referendum question was the lack of contextual knowledge regarding how council tax is divided across authorities. The main outcome of this lack of understanding was that participants felt that the council tax referendum was asking for a percentage increase on their entire council tax bill.

Participants felt that their lack of knowledge, and the lack of information provided with the question, meant that their vote was de facto biased; they were only able to base their vote on the impact that a higher increase would have on their personal finances.

"It is not anything about the layout of the question or the way it is being asked. It is simply the question. However you word it, if you ask someone if they want you to take 5.2% or 3.5% they are going to say they want to take less, unless you tell them what it is going on and they agree with it." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"The more information, in a nice clear fashion, the easier it will be for people to make a decision." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

"You have to find out don't you, to make an informed decision." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

Thinking overall about the question, it was suggested that the following information be clarified and provided:

A) The implication of a 'yes' or 'no' vote

As mentioned earlier within the report, some participants had re-read the question a number of times to ensure that they fully understood it. Two key suggestions emerged across the research.

Firstly, it was clear that the word 'set' within the CLG wording often generated confusion over the impact the vote would have on the council tax increase. Replacing this word was considered an important way to avoid any potential confusion.

Secondly, participants suggested that the layout of the Alternative wording made it easier to understand the implication of a 'yes' or 'no' vote as it detailed this on separate lines.

B) How council tax is divided across authorities

Although participants had some idea that council tax went towards different services they did not know how it was divided across authorities. It was agreed that both versions of the

question made much more sense once participants had seen the information detailing how council tax is divided and the impact this has on the council tax referendum question.

"We were all confused about these questions at the beginning and you are not going to be there holding up these boards and saying 'here is this pie chart and this is what it means'. We understand it more now because you have shown us that but really all the voters that go in are going to be on exactly the same page as we were in the beginning so there does need to be something there." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

However, participants struggled to think of how best to ensure people understood about the division of council tax and that the council tax referendum question referred to a proportion of overall council tax.

Across the research, providing a pie chart (as shown in the stimulus materials) alongside the question was a popular suggestion.

"You need to see something like this [pie chart] because I've got a clearer picture now myself when I look at it." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"It created more confusion because they said 'part of the council tax' goes to Camden Council. They might as well just go the whole way and say where it all goes with a little pie chart." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

However, it was also strongly suggested that some accompanying literature be provided prior to the referendum. This is further discussed later within this section.

In addition to the provision of information, participants felt that the question wording itself could go some way to clarifying that the council tax referendum was asking about a proportion of council tax. It was clear that people tended to focus on the words 'council', 'council tax' and 'increase' and assumed that the question referred to the entire council tax bill.

"At the moment it says 'Camden Council has set a council tax' – you are thinking it is them directly putting the whole of it up." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

As discussed earlier within the report, the Alternative wording was considered to go some way towards indicating that the referendum was in relation to an authority's proportion of the council tax. But most felt that this did not go far enough. They felt that the question needed to be clearer in detailing what proportion of the council tax the authority was asking about.

"Remove the implication that it's Rochford District's Council tax and make it Rochford District Council's piece of the tax." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"They could say the Greater London Authority, which is however much of your council tax, is going to increase by such and such so you are not thinking it is



all of your council tax." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

C) Financial impact of the increase

When participants were shown the stimulus material detailing information about a council tax referendum they noted that they found it useful to see a monetary value associated with the increase. This better enabled them to visualise what financial impact the increase would have. In many instances participants were surprised about the small monetary difference between the two percentage increases.

After consideration, participants recognised that it would not be possible to detail a monetary value within the question itself as different bands would make this too difficult. However, they did feel that some indication of monetary value of the increase would be useful and suggested that this could be provided prior to people making their vote. Some suggested that to keep this simple any information could show the monetary increase based on a 'typical' house/ band in their local area.

"Even just an example of a 'typical' house in band whatever...what the increase would be." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

D) Reason for the increase

Participants were keen to know why an authority was looking for an increase in their proportion of the council tax and what impact it would have on local services.

"If the government have set a limit why do Birmingham council want more?" (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

They were particularly interested to know whether the additional funds would be spent on a service that they personally felt to be valuable. Participants further raised a question about whether any services would be cut if the higher increase was not achieved.

"This is what you get for 5.3% and this is what you are going to get for 3.5%. That would be even more useful because then you would actually know if you wanted to increase to 5.2%" (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Some participants felt that this information should be included in the question itself.

"They should list the benefits of each percentage increase in the question." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

However, upon reflection it was agreed that this could make the question biased. The desire for this information to be included in the question was clearly driven by a desire to simply know more about why an increase was being requested. Suggestions for how this information could be provided are detailed in the next section.

8.2 Information provision

Having generated suggestions for what type of information would be useful prior to voting in a referendum, participants considered what would be the best way to provide this information.

A popular suggestion was information through the post.

"You would get a leaflet through with this [pie chart] on it." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)

"If they were to go ahead and do this they would need to definitely send out loads and loads and loads of flyers and lots of information telling people 'if you approve it then this is what you get for 4.9% and if you don't approve it then this is what you are going to get for 3.5%' and have that crystal clear." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Some felt that a 'to the resident' letter would limit the number of people who would actually pick up and read the letter or leaflet as these types of generic communications were typically ignored. With this in mind some suggested that the information be sent to named individuals on the Electoral Register, or alongside voting cards.

"I think they just need to write to everyone on the Electoral Register." (LA voter, responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Another popular suggestion was the provision of information at the polling station. Participants felt that this would be a good way of ensuring that information was provided to all voters and suggested posters or information leaflets that people could read before voting.

"A poster on the booth so you could read it before you put your cross." (LA voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Birmingham)

Overall, participants assumed that some information regarding the referendum would appear in their local press, and thought that this would be a good way of reaching local people. Other suggestions included a dedicated telephone number or email address to contact should people have queries about the referendum, a dedicated page on the Council website and a Facebook page.

"It should have like a Facebook link or something so then people can go on Facebook and explain why that has happened." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)

Regardless of channel, participants were keen to note that the information should be clear and short. It was agreed that lengthy leaflets tended to disengage them and they would be unlikely to read these.

"It has got to be short and you have got to be able to understand it but there should also be some sort of thing in case you want to actually read why – so a little leaflet that explains why." (LA non-voter, not responsible for paying council tax, Camden)



"You wouldn't want pages and pages because you wouldn't read it. You just want a few bullet points or something like that." (LA non-voters, responsible for paying council tax, Rochford)



9 Appendix

9.1 Discussion guides

A) Focus group discussion guide

Interview Objective:

Explore how voters react to and understand the proposed referendum question. Specifically:

- Identify any areas of the question that are problematic and the reasons for any problems.
- Investigate the extent to which the question meets the Commissions' question assessment guidelines: being easy to understand; to the point; unambiguous; ensuring that voters don't consider one response more favourably than another; avoid misleading voters.
- Explore potential ways of redressing any problems through changes to the question and other channels of information.

1. Moderator introduction and initial question test

Moderator: Explain that participants are here to discuss their thoughts about a potential council tax referendum question that the Electoral Commission would like to understand more about. Explain that before discussion starts you would like them to complete an exercise:

- Explain: I'd like to start our discussion by asking you to complete an exercise.
- Please look at the sheet on your chair. Without talking, please answer the referendum question on the first page as if you were doing so for real.
- Moderator please clarify: The referendum question is what you would see on your ballot paper if you were to go along to a polling station to vote, or what you would receive by post if you were registered as a postal voter.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the question. If you would be happy to tell people how you answered the referendum question, please feel free to do so during the discussion. If you do not want to tell people how you answered, you do not have to. The discussion will focus on your understanding of the question.
- Now you have all answered the referendum question, please answer the three questions on the worksheet:
 - On the first page, please summarise what you think the referendum question was asking in your own words.
 - On the second page, please underline anything you found clear in blue and anything you found unclear in red.
 - On the third page, please write down what changes, if any, you would like to see made to the referendum question to make it clearer.



2. Introduction **5 mins**

(Aim: meet the participants and gather initial views regarding the referendum question)

- Thank you for completing the exercise. Moderator - explain purpose of research:
 - During the discussion we will be looking at your views towards the Council tax Referendum question you have just completed. GfK NOP is carrying out research for the Electoral Commission to test the referendum question with voters.
 - Does everyone know what a referendum is? Just to clarify, referendums are held to ask the people in a country or area to vote on a proposal.

3. Completing the question: accuracy **5 mins**

(Aim: explore how confident participants feel in answering the question)

- Who feels confident that they gave the response they wanted to?
 - What makes you feel confident about this?
 - Do you have any doubts that you have given the response you wanted to?
- Who does not feel confident that they gave the response they wanted to?
 - Why do you not feel confident about this?
 - What could make you feel more confident about your response?
- What do you think the question was asking you?
- What do you think you have voted for?
- How did you decide whether to vote yes or no?
 - Moderator please note: this question is included to give insight into any potential misconceptions when answering the question but we are keen not to enter a discussion on general views around council tax.
- Based on the discussion so far:
 - Who feels they have given the response they wanted to? Why?
 - Who feels they have not given the response they wanted to? Why not?

4. Completing the question: literal meaning **10 mins**

(Aim: understand how far participants understand the literal meaning of the question; the words on the page)

- What words would you use to describe the referendum question?
Prompt if needed:
 - Positive words: easy, clear, to the point, straightforward.
 - Negative words: difficult, unclear, longwinded, confusing.

Ease of understanding

- Overall, how easy was the question to understand?
 - What were the main things that made it easy to understand?
 - What were the main things that made it difficult to understand?
- Which words and phrases did you identify as difficult to understand?
 - Why were these difficult to understand?

- What do you think they mean?
- How far did these affect your understanding of the question?
- How could they be changed and improved?
- Did the question give you the right amount of information? Why / Why not?
 - What more does it need to tell you?
 - Is that information that needs to be on the ballot paper or could it be somewhere else?
 - Moderator please note: this is a chance to get initial spontaneous views around information provision at this stage but we will cover this in greater detail later within the guide.

Neutrality

- Does the question make one option sound better than the other?
 - To what extent does it encourage people to vote one way or another?
- What kind of person do you think wrote this question?
- Does the person who wrote the question want you to vote one way or the other?
- Are there parts of the question that sounds particularly positive or negative?
 - Which parts are these?

Summary and improvements

- Do you agree or disagree that the referendum question:
 - Uses plain language?
 - Is clear in what it is asking?
 - Is biased towards one option?
 - Is to the point?
 - Is misleading to voters?

5. Testing the other authority paper and alternative wording 15 mins

(Aim: test comprehension of other papers including alternative wording)

Stimulus: here we will show the billing or precepting authority paper – whichever was not shown at the beginning of the guide.

There is another example question paper that I would like to show you.

- What do you think about this question?
- Would you answer it the same as the first one we looked at?
- Is it asking the same thing?
 - How is it different to the question we looked at earlier?
 - Is there anything you do not understand?
 - What improvements could be made to this question?

Stimulus: here we will show the **alternative** wording.

- What do you think about this question?
- What's different between this question and the first/second one you looked at?
- Is it asking the same thing?

- Moderator clarify: these are two different ways of asking the same question.
- What works well about this wording? Why?
- What works badly about this wording? Why?

Stimulus: here we will directly **compare** both questions. Moderator to show the questions side by side.

- Moderator: if problems were identified with the first question please explore this issue with the alternative wording/ compare this problem across the different versions.
-
- Looking at the different options:
 - How do these questions compare?
 - Which parts of the questions work better / worse? Why?
 - Is one of the questions clearer? Is this the whole question, or just parts of it?
 - Is one of the questions more to the point? All or parts of it?
 - Is one of the questions more balanced than the other? All or parts of it?
 - Is one question easier to answer? Why?

6. Understanding the question in context **15 mins**

(Aim: explore the context/ awareness/ knowledge when answering the question)

- Can anyone remember there being a referendum in your local area before?
 - What was this about?
- Why might there be a referendum question about your Council tax?
 - Has anyone heard of this?
- What impact do you think a Council tax referendum would have?
- Thinking about the **first** question we looked at (billing or precepting depending on rotation)...
 - What will be the outcome if [a yes answer] is given?
 - What would this mean for you?
 - How much of an increase do you think this would be?
 - By how much do you think your council tax bill would increase?
 - What will be the outcome if [a no answer] is given?
 - What would this mean for you?
 - How much of an increase do you think this would be?
 - By how much do you think your council tax bill would increase?
- Thinking about the **second** question we looked at (billing or precepting depending on rotation)...
 - What will be the outcome if [a yes answer] is given?
 - What would this mean for you?
 - How much of an increase do you think this would be?
 - By how much do you think your council tax bill would increase?
 - What will be the outcome if [a no answer] is given?
 - What would this mean for you?
 - How much of an increase do you think this would be?
 - By how much do you think your council tax bill would increase?

- Thinking about both the questions (billing and precepting) what would be the outcome if:
 - There were 2 yes votes?
 - There were 2 no votes?
 - There was 1 yes vote and 1 no vote?
- Who feels confident that they understand what the referendum is about?
 - Why/ why not?
- Is there any information that would help you better understand the question?

Stimulus: here we will show some information regarding the Council tax referendum – exact content TBC. Moderator please clarify that the examples are made up for the purposes of the research.

- For each statement shown ask:
 - Did you know about this before?
 - Has this changed how you understand the question?
 - Additional prompt for billing and precepting to be asked when this information is provided:
 - How clear is it who is asking to increase the Council tax?
 - Who else could ask to increase the Council tax in your local area?
 - Moderator please note: we are interested to know whether the alternative wording has made any difference to peoples' knowledge so please prompt around whether information was gleaned from the questions if appropriate.

7. Reflecting on and refining the question 15 mins

(Aim: explore how the information impacts on understanding and identify how the question could be improved)

- Thinking about the information we have just looked at...
- Does this change the way you would respond to the question? How/ why?

Moderator: ensure discuss any changes to the way would answer the question. Start with the first question shown (billing or precepting) and then bring in second question shown to check whether there are any further comments.

Moderator: please go through each question sentence by sentence to ensure understanding and identify whether it is clear/ where improvements are needed.

- Looking at the first (billing or precepting) question we looked at:
 - Do you think the wording of the question needs to be changed to make it easier to answer? How?
 - Moderator: check if there is any additional feedback for the other (billing or precepting) paper.
- Looking at the second (alternative) question we looked at:
 - Do you think the wording of the question needs to be changed to make it easier to answer? How?



- Overall, which elements of these questions (billing/ precepting and alternative) would you keep?
- Which would you change/ why?
 - Which changes do you think are essential? Why?
 - Which changes would be just nice to have?

Moderator explain: it could be that a Council tax referendum would include a question from the Council (billing) and a question from the [other] (precepting) authority. So there could two questions or more in one referendum.

- What do you think about this?

9. Information needs

10 mins

(Aim: explore what information people would like and how this should be delivered)

- What information would you expect to be told about the Council Tax Referendum?
- What information would you like to know in order to enable you to vote? Why?
 - From the information we have looked at today, which information would you tell people in your area about this referendum?
 - What do you think would be the most important thing to tell people? Why?
- What type of information would be useful? Why?
- Who is responsible for giving people this information?
- What would be the best way to provide this information?
 - Prompt:
 - Advice in postal vote packs
 - Adverts in the local paper
 - Newspaper articles
 - Notices in public places

10. Summary and Close

5 mins

(Aim: wrap up the discussion)

- Thinking about everything we have looked at this evening, is there anything you would suggest we do to ensure that people understand the Council tax Referendum question?
- Moderator: go around the group and get an answer from each participant.



B) Mini-depth interview discussion guide

Interview Objective:

Explore how voters react to and understand the proposed referendum question. Specifically:

- Identify any areas of the question that are problematic and the reasons for any problems.
- Investigate the extent to which the question meets the Commissions' question assessment guidelines: being easy to understand; to the point; unambiguous; ensuring that voters don't consider one response more favourably than another; avoid misleading voters.
- Explore potential ways of redressing any problems through changes to the question and other channels of information.

Moderator: Explain that the participant is here to discuss their thoughts about a potential council tax referendum question that the Electoral Commission would like to understand more about. Explain that before discussion starts you would like them to complete an exercise:

1. Moderator introduction and initial question test 5 mins

(Aim: introduce research to participants and ask participants to complete the referendum question)

- Explain purpose of the discussion: GfK NOP is carrying out research for the Electoral Commission to test a Council tax referendum question with voters.
- Explain: I'd like to start our discussion by asking you to complete an exercise.

Stimulus: here we will show the billing authority question or precepting authority paper. These will be rotated across the mini-depths.

- Please answer the referendum question as if you were doing so for real.
- Can you tell me in your own words what you think the question was asking you?
 - What do you think you have voted for?
- How confident do you feel that you have given the response you wanted to? Why?

2. Completing the question: literal and contextual meaning 5 mins

(Aim: understand how far participants understand the literal meaning of the question; the words on the page)

Moderator: as you go through the question with respondent please mark it up to highlight things that are positive and things that are negative – we will then revisit this at the end of the interview.

Literal:

- Overall, how easy was the question to understand? Why?
 - What were the main things that made it easy to understand?
 - What were the main things that made it difficult to understand?
 - Which words and phrases did you find difficult to understand?
 - Did the question give you the right amount of information? Why / Why not?



- Are there parts of the question that sound particularly positive or negative?
- What words would you use to describe the referendum question?
Prompt if needed:
 - Positive words: easy, clear, to the point, straightforward.
 - Negative words: difficult, unclear, longwinded, confusing.

Contextual:

- What impact do you think a Council tax referendum would have?
 - What will be the outcome if [a yes answer] is given?
 - What would this mean for you?
 - What will be the outcome if [a no answer] is given?
 - What would this mean for you?
- How confident do you feel that you understand what the referendum is about? Why?

3. Testing alternative wording and information provision _____ 5 mins

(Aim: test comprehension of alternative wording and explore impact of information provision)

Stimulus: here we will show the **alternative** wording (Versions to be rotated across interviews)

- Here is another way of asking the same question.
 - What works well about this wording? Why?
 - What works badly about this wording? Why?

Stimulus: here we will directly **compare** both questions.

- Looking at the different options:
 - How do these questions compare?
 - Which parts of the questions work better / worse? Why?
 - Is one of the questions clearer? Is this the whole question, or just parts of it?
 - Is one of the questions more to the point? All or parts of it?
 - Is one of the questions more balanced than the other? All or parts of it?
 - Is one question easier to answer? Why?

Stimulus: here we will show some information regarding the Council tax referendum – exact content TBC.

- Show statements then ask:
 - Did you know this before?
 - Has this information changed how you understand the question?
 - Is there a particular bit of information that's made a difference?
 - Does this change the way you would respond to the question? How/ why?

4. Improvements, information needs and close _____ 5 mins

(Aim: explore what information people would like and how this should be delivered and end mini-depth)



Improvements:

- Moderator: please refer to marked up question. Explore any thoughts on question length, type of language, words used.
- Looking at both of the questions we have looked at:
 - Do you think the question needs to be changed to make it easier to answer? How?
 - Overall, how would you improve the questions?

Information needs:

- Moderator: please only briefly cover this.
- What information would you expect to be told about the Council Tax Referendum before it took place?
- What information would you like to know in order to enable you to vote? Why?

9.2 Stimulus material

The stimulus materials were individualised for the relevant authorities (billing and precepting) in all four locations, meaning that there were a number of different versions pertaining to different relevant authorities. We have included one example here to highlight the information that participants would have seen. Our example shows only one billing and one precepting authority, whereas in the research we may have shown the participants' examples with up to 4 precepting authorities included. A condensed version of this information was shown in the mini-depth interviews.

Showcard 1

Council Tax

Council tax helps pay for things like refuse collection, highways, street cleaning, leisure centres, park and recreation grounds, police, fire and rescue services, environmental health, education, social services and libraries.

The amount you pay depends on the value of your home.

Showcard 2

Council Tax

Council tax is made up of payments to a number of different organisations.

All of the following organisations can charge Council tax:

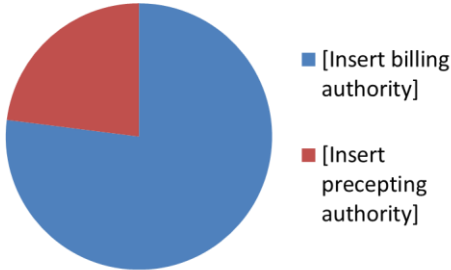
- Your Council
- Fire and Rescue Authority
- Police Authority
- County Council
- Town Council
- Parish Council

Showcard 3:

Council Tax

When the council sends out council tax bills to people’s homes, those bills are made up of charges from all the different organisations who can charge.

For example:
A Council tax bill in [insert billing authority] might be made up like this.



Showcard 4

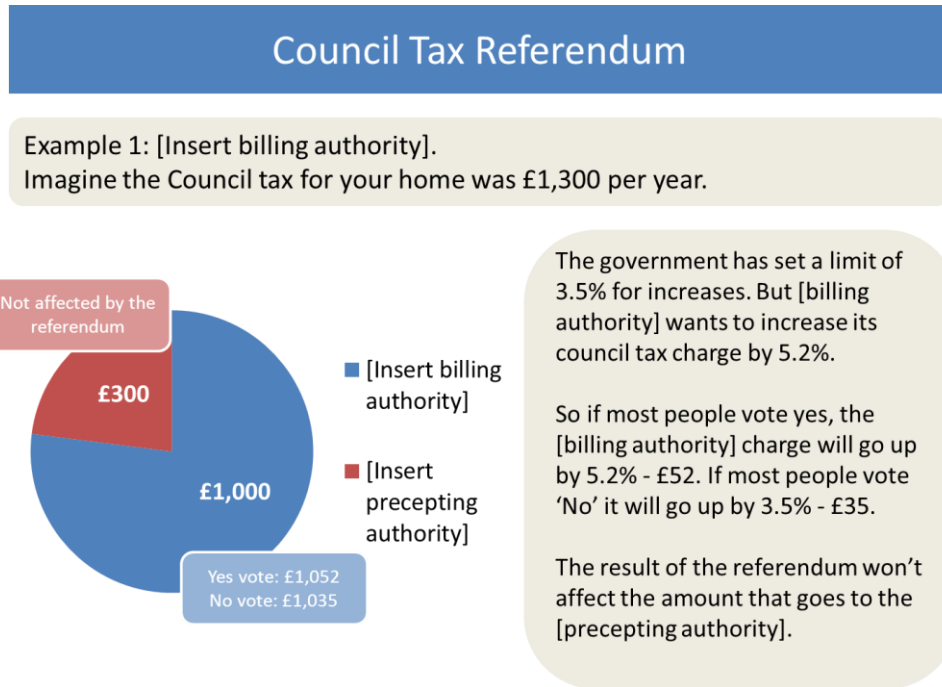
Council Tax Referendum

Every year, each of the organisations decides how much council tax to charge.

The government has decided that if an organisation wants to increase the amount they charge by more than a certain amount, they will have to ask voters in a referendum.

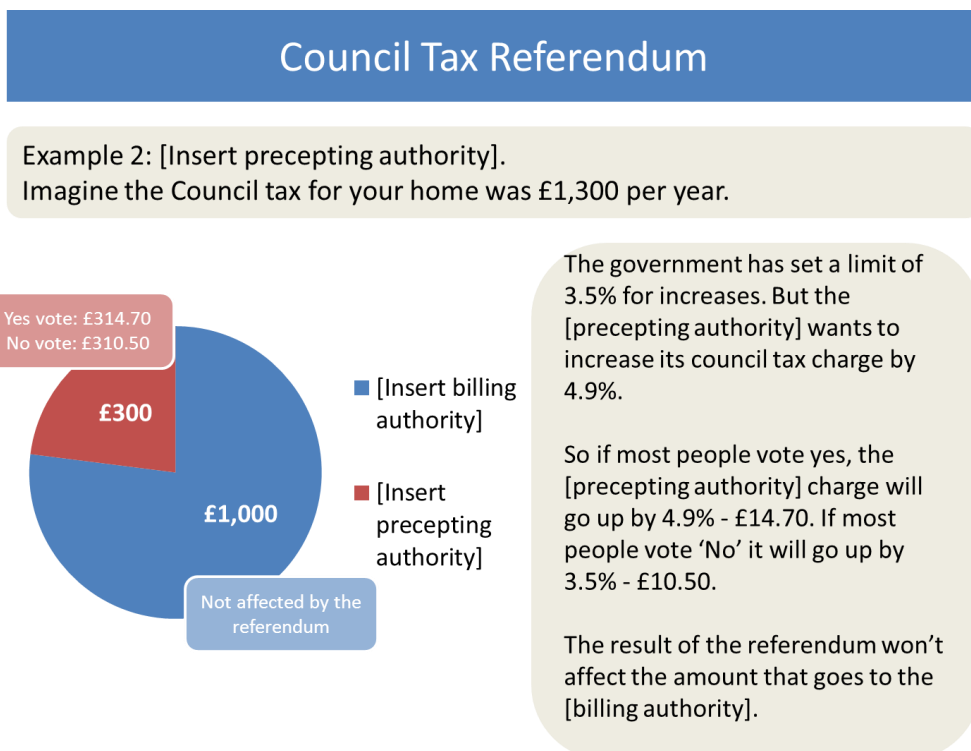
Showcard 5

This card shows the changes if a billing authority was proposing the question.



Showcard 6

This card shows the changes if a precepting authority was proposing the question.



9.3 Mini-depth quotas achieved

This table shows how the 86 mini-depth interviews break down across a range of characteristics; gender, age, socio-economic grade (SEG), marital status, tenancy, ethnicity and voting behaviour.

Quota	Rochford	Camden	Stockport	Birmingham	Hard to reach ³	TOTAL
Gender						
Male	5	13	4	10	8	40
Female	10	7	9	10	10	46
Age						
17-24	3	3		8	2	16
25-34	3	5	4	4	10	26
35-44	3	3	1	1	3	11
45-59		5	3	4	3	15
60+	6	4	5	3		18
Socio-economic grade						
B	4	7	1	3	1	16
C1	4	7	1	4	1	17
C2		2	2	2	3	9
D	5	2	6	7	6	26
E	2	2	3	4	7	18
Marital status/children in home						
Married/cohabiting (children at home)	2	2	2	2	7	15
Widowed/Single/Divorced/Separated/Living alone (children at home)	1		3	1	1	6
Living with parents/Living with friends (children at home)	1			1	1	3
Married/cohabiting (children NOT at home)	5	5	3	1	2	15
Widowed/Single/Divorced/Separated/Living alone (children NOT at home)	4	10	5	13	5	37
Living with parents/Living with friends (children NOT at home)	2	4		2	2	10
Tenancy						
Home owner	9	6	6	6	2	29

³ Hard to reach respondents were interviewed across all four of the locations.

Council tenant	2	5	4	6	7	24
Housing association tenant	2	3	3	3	6	17
Private rented accommodation	2	7		4	3	16
Ethnicity						
Ethnic minority group		6	2	5	10	23
Voting behaviour/council tax payment						
Solely or jointly responsible for paying the Council Tax 4bill for the household AND always or usually vote in local elections.	5	9	4	4	3	25
Solely or jointly responsible for paying the Council Tax bill for the household AND sometimes or never vote in local elections.	4	2	1	3	3	13
Receive partial council tax benefit AND always or usually vote in local elections	1	1		1		3
Receive partial council tax benefit AND sometime or never vote in local elections	1	1	1	3		6
Not responsible for paying the Council Tax bill for the household AND always or usually vote in local elections.		3	1	3	2	9
Not responsible for paying the Council Tax bill for the household AND sometimes or never vote in local elections.	2	1		3	1	7
Receive 100% council tax benefit and always or usually vote in local elections		2	5	1	4	12
Receive 100% of council tax benefit and sometimes or never vote in local elections	2		1	2	5	11

9.4 Tested increases

Location	Authority (and whether billing [b] or precepting [p])	Amount in £GBP ⁴	Percentage increases (for a 'No' and a 'Yes' vote respectively)	Increases in £ (for a 'No' and a 'Yes' vote respectively)
Camden	Camden Council (b)	£1000	3.5% and 5.2%	£35 and £52
	Great London Authority (p)	£300	3.5% and 4.9%	£10.50 and £14.70
Stockport	Stockport Council (b)	£1,000	3.5% and 5.2%	£35 and £52
	Greater Manchester Police Authority (p)	£100	1.5% and 4.5%	£1.50 and £4.50
Birmingham	Birmingham Council (b)	£1,000	3.5% and 4.8%	£35 and £48
	West Midlands Fire and Civil Defence Authority (p)	£50	2.5% and 4.1%	£1.25 and £2.05
Rochford	Rochford District Council (b)	£200	4.5% and 8%	£9 and £16
	Essex County Council (p)	£1,000	3.5% and 5.2%	£35 and £52
	Hawkwell Parish Council (p)	£30	3.5% and 15%	£1.05 and £4.50

⁴ The amounts were chosen based around band D council tax banding rates in each local area. The actual amounts used were chosen because they needed to be easy to use in terms of explaining how council tax referendums could work and resultantly, reasonably simple round numbers were used.



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