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Ridley warned on 5 poll tax costs

By David Walker, Public Administration Correspondent

The Government's revised timetable for introducing poll tax in 1990 will not be met unless ministers authorize councils to take on extra manpower and buy new computing power.

Deputations to the Department of the Environment are being planned by Conservative and Labour councillors to warn Mr Nicholas Ridley, Secretary of State for the Environment, that his target date will not be met if the Government tries to do it on the cheap.

Local authority treasurers are resentful about a recent speech by Mr Christopher Hope, a junior minister, in which he claimed they were trying to "pull the wool" over councillors' eyes on the extra staff required to get poll tax up and running.

The treasurer of one inner London borough estimated that collecting rates and poll tax during a four-year transitional period from 1990 will require four times as much effort as working the present system — and cost an extra million a year.

Officers in Waltham Forest, where poll tax will also run in parallel with domestic rates for four years, have spoken of needing about 500 extra staff.

That is probably an exaggeration. But even Conservative Harrow, where the new tax comes in on April 1, 1990 in a "big bang", will require an extra 100 staff.

Department estimates that poll tax could be planned for without extra resources were described by one treasurer as "naive" and by another as "a recipe for disaster".

Mr Neil Newton, treasurer of Bromley and president of the Society of London Treasurers, said planning for poll tax was easier in the suburbs and the shires where there was a settled population.

But Mr Howard Longden, chief executive of Hove, said that there was no suitable computer software and it would take a long time to work up one.

The department is prepared to consider an allowance for the extra cost of collection in 1989.

More will lose under poll tax 5

The Government has disclosed for the first time that more households will lose than gain when the poll tax is introduced. Under previous plans for a four-year transition, ministers had estimated that 9.15 million households would lose, and 11.4 million gain.

But with the announcement that it will come in one go in 1990 in England and Wales, it is estimated that 8,810,000 households will lose in the first year, with 8,800,000 gaining. The number of pensioners living alone who lose has fallen from 470,000 to 380,000, Michael Howard, Minister for Local Government, told Jeff Rooker, Labour's local government spokesman.

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IN BRIEF

Spending allegation rejected 6

Margaret Thatcher has written to Jeff Rooker, Labour's local government spokesman, rejecting his allegations that the Government broke Whitehall codes to put out poll tax propaganda.

Mr Rooker said a Department of Environment leaflet defending poll tax proposals was issued by the Central Office of Information at the taxpayer's expense. According to convention, the Government was not allowed to issue publicity material promoting its policy until a Bill or White Paper had been published.

The Prime Minister has replied that there was "nothing improper" in civil servants preparing and issuing the leaflet, adding: "It must be right for Governments to explain on request their policies and legislative proposals, in the most economical way, to those who ask for details". So far 21,000 copies have been sent out.

Ingham up the poll 19 WD

THE number of households gaining under the poll tax would be almost identical to the number of losers, the local government minister, Mr Michael Howard, said in a written answer. He put the total of gainers at 8,800,000 households and the total of losers at 8,810,000. The figures mask the consequences for individuals, with at least 18,810,000 losers, compared with 14,185,000 who gain.

TORY MPs were amazed to read in all but a couple of daily newspapers on Tuesday that the Cabinet had decided to ignore their demands for a general overnight introduction of the poll tax in 1990. They read authoritative accounts that Nicholas Ridley, Secretary of State for the Environment, was about to announce an unsatisfactory compromise that would allow only some councils to opt out of a transition period.

But lo and behold, later that day, Mr Ridley triumphantly announced that the backbench demands had won the day, and there would be overnight introduction everywhere but in London. How was it, the backbenchers bemusedly asked, that the massed ranks of plugged-in journalists could get it wrong?

The answer is simple and salutary. The lobby correspondents

based their stories on an unattributable briefing on Monday by Bernard Ingham, the Prime Minister's press secretary. Whether Mr Ingham got it wrong, or the lobby collectively misunderstood his words, remains a matter for conjecture.

TODAY

Young nurses in poll tax blow 6

PLANS to make student nurses pay the full poll tax could drive youngsters away from the profession, it was claimed last night.

Student nurses on just £4,600 a year could have to fork out around £300 each under the government plan.

Now the Royal College of Nursing says many young people will be deterred from becoming nurses.

An RCN spokesman said yesterday "Most student nurses are single and share accommodation. Their household bills are set to rocket.

"Most come to an area to train and remain there to

work. London in particular depends on attracting people from other areas. This will accelerate regional recruitment problems."

Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley announced in a Commons written answer that student nurses would have to pay the full community charge when it is introduced in 1990.

But students in universities, sixth forms and other higher education colleges will pay only 20 per cent of the tax — and 500,000 people will pay nothing at all.

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