

To: Cabinet
Date: 14 September 2022
Report of: The Head of Financial Services
Title of Report: Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2023/24

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To seek approval for proposals for consultation on changes to the Council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2023/24
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities and Culture
Corporate Priority:	Enable an Inclusive Economy Support thriving communities
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:	
1.	Agree that the proposals for the 2023/24 Council Tax Reduction Scheme outlined in the report be subject to consultation for an 8 week period from 19th September 2022 and
2.	Note the intention of the Head of Financial Services to bring a further report to Cabinet in January 2023 to outline the outcome of the consultation process and make proposals for the 2023/24 Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Consultation questions
Appendix 2	Risk register
Appendix 3	Initial Equality Impact Assessment

Introduction and background

1. In April 2013 the national Council Tax Benefit (CTB) scheme was replaced by a new Council Tax Reduction (CTR) scheme. The CTB scheme was funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and supported people on low incomes by reducing the amount of council tax they had to pay.
2. The CTR scheme is for working age customers and determined locally by Councils rather than nationally by the DWP. The separate scheme that exists for pension age recipients is

a national scheme prescribed by regulation and cannot be varied locally. The basic calculation for CTR is an assessment of the household income versus the amount of money that central government says the household needs to live off. A household can be a single person, couples, families with children etc. The scheme works by applying discounts against the council tax liability based on the financial circumstances of a homeowner. The discount reduces the amount of council tax income to be collected by the authority. Whilst the Government initially provided funding for the new local schemes through the Revenue Support Grant, since the Grant has now reduced to zero there is no funding provided by central government for any CTR scheme.

3. Councils are required to review their CTR working age scheme annually, and determine whether or not to revise it. In order to change its scheme a council is required by law to:
 - Consult with the major precepting authorities
 - Consult with other persons it considers are likely to have an interest in the operation of the scheme.

The CTR scheme itself must be adopted by the Council, and the approval of the scheme cannot be delegated to an officer or committee.

4. The CTR scheme must take account of and support:
 - Work incentives and in particular avoid disincentives for those moving into work;
 - The Council's duties to protect vulnerable people (under the Equality Act 2010, the Care Act 2014, the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Housing Act 1996); and
 - The Armed Forces Covenant which protect those people who have served in the British armies.
5. 2018/19 was the first year that Oxford City Council (OCC) amended its CTR scheme to that introduced by the Government in 2013-14. From 2019/20 and subsequent years, further amendments were made, including moving to an Income Banded Scheme initially for Universal Credit claimants and then across all Working Age claimants. The Council's scheme still provides a reduction of up to 100% against the council tax liability.
6. When the Council set its budget in February 2022 the annual estimated total loss of council tax income arising from CTR was £12.3 million based on the current CTR caseload. The Council's share of this loss of income based on the Council's Band D council tax at the time that the budget was set was £1.8m
7. The balance of the income loss is picked up by the major preceptors, Oxfordshire County Council and Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioners
8. Due to COVID 19 there has been an increase in caseload despite a pause in the roll out of Universal Credit as the DWP diverted resources to deal with new claims. The cost to the Council and its major preceptors from loss of council tax income has therefore increased. Caseload is now the highest it has been during the previous 5 years (as at 7th August 2022) with 7002 benefitting from the local scheme in April 2022.
9. Any increase in the amount of Council Tax due each April will see the amount of CTR increase proportionally, thus increasing the cost of the CTR scheme.
10. Table 1 below sets out the cost and caseload (number of CTR claimants) for the OCC CTR scheme since its introduction. The cost of the scheme is shared by Oxford City Council (15.31%), Oxfordshire County Council (73.83%) and Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner (10.86%) in accordance with the proportion of council tax levied by each. The table shows the increase in the cost of the scheme to the authority since it was introduced in 2018-19. Our latest forecast would indicate an increase in the cost since we set the budget for 2022-23 of around £174k.

Table 1 Cost of CTR to the City Council and its major preceptors					
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23 as of 07/08/22
Cost of Pension Age	£3,284,610	£3,554,232	£3,841,522	£3,408,679	£3,418,595
Pension Age caseload	2,990	2,918	2,964	2,657	2,549
Cost of Working Age	£6,541,638	£6,459,250	£7,609,169	£8,977,962	£9,478,093
Working age caseload	5,558	5,303	5,871	7,002	6,628
Total Cost	£9,826,248	£10,013,482	£11,450,691*	£12,386,641	£12,896,688
Total Caseload	8,548	8,221	8,835	9,659	9,177
Cost of the scheme to OCC	£1,561,391	£1,579,126	£1,774,857*	£1,893,876*	£1,974,444

Note that figures marked * are net of any discretionary amounts awarded under s13a. During 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 additional funding was received that allowed us to award a discretionary CTR amount to those liable to pay Council Tax.

11. The Council's caseload has increased by 342 cases since the start of the 2020/21 due to the Covid pandemic. The table shows that whilst the caseload increased significantly in 2021/22, it has again dropped to the current level of 6,628. Expenditure is increased due to the increase in the council tax charge. The Council still receives on average 40 claims per week, demonstrating that the demand is high for this support.
12. In making proposals for the 2023/24 consultation, officers have considered a range of options for changing the CTR scheme which seek to continue to streamline the process of award and ongoing administration and also provide options on reducing cost to the Council. Regard has been given to the cost of living increase to the public and the Councils current and forecast financial pressures.
13. Appendix 1 shows the suggested consultation questions for the 2023/24 scheme. These are summarised as:
 - Whether or not to increase the Income Bands or to freeze at current levels. With CPI inflation estimated to in excess of 10% in September 2022, the large increase to the bands will increase the cost to the scheme overall.
 - The income bandings currently being used are shown in Table 2. The figures have been calculated using the following;
 - Band 1 is equivalent to 16 hours on the National Minimum Wage (NMW £9.50 per hour from April 2022) rounded upwards
 - Band 2 is equivalent to 24 hours on the NMW rounded upwards
 - Band 3 is equivalent to 30 hours on the Oxford living wage (OLW £10.50 per hour from April 2022) rounded upwards
 - Band 4 equivalent to the difference between the top of Band 3 and the Band 5 figure
 - Band 5 is the Benefit Cap amount for couples (£384.62) increased by CPI at Sept 21 of 3.1%.

Table 2

Band	Weekly Income	Discount received
1	£0 - £152.00	100%
2	£152.01 - £228.00	75%
3	£228.01 - £315.00	50%
4	£315.01 - £396.99	25%
5	£397 and above	0%

- If we do increase, to use CPI instead of RPI, in line with the DWP up-ratings. CPI is generally lower than RPI and notwithstanding the comments above will lead to lower CTR payments.
- To consider if the banded income approach should take into account family size. Currently the scheme has a single structure for a total income for all applications, with no regard to household composition

A review has been undertaken by staff to review other schemes across the County. Cherwell also has a banded scheme and their scheme take into account disability and claims with children.

- To consider giving a reduction of up to 100% for passported cases, limiting the reduction to a % or a fixed weekly amount for all other claims. If we were to reduce the % award, or ask all claimants to pay a set amount, our tax base would increase in future years, as there would be fewer Band D equivalents lost as a result of awarding CTR.
 - *If everyone were required to pay £1 per week (so a £52 annual charge being a minimum contribution), based on the City Council's share Council Tax at 15.31%:*
 - Estimated Saving of £48k per annum on CTR expenditure before any tax base amendments
 - The Council may need to consider increasing the write-off provision as other authorities have advised small amounts of CT do not get paid, and we do not take court action for debts below £50.
 - *If everyone were required to pay £2 per week (so a £104 annual charge being a minimum contribution), based on the City Council's share of Council Tax at 15.31%:*
 - Estimated saving of £96k per annum on CTR expenditure before any tax base amendments
 - May need to consider increasing income collection staff resources as this could increase the number of cases requiring court action for non-payment.
 - May need to consider increasing the bad debt provision as more debts could be written off as people may make a partial payment to bring the level of debt down to under £50
- To automatically reduce the CTR award to a maximum of 75% if there is a non-dependant in the property. In cases where there is a disability benefit in payment for the applicant or an additional adult, then the reduction would not be applied. This mirrors the application of the single person discount.

14. Within the Consultation provision has been made to consult on whether a minimum council tax amount should be made by all working age claimants. Consulting whether claimants should contribute some amount of council tax before the discount is applied will retain the option for the Council to initiate this change from 1st April 2023, compared to savings in other areas of the Council's budget, should the Councils forthcoming budget setting round require significant savings to be made from overall net spend.

15. Consultation will be carried out using the Council's online consultation system, and also making use of paper questionnaires. As with previous years, paper consultations will be made available in the library in the City Centre. The consultation will be promoted by the Council's Communications Team. The consultation will last for a period of eight weeks beginning on 19 September 2022. The proposed consultation document is included at Appendix 1.

Discretionary support

16. The Council Tax Regulations make provision for discretionary support to be made available on application by a customer who is facing difficulty paying their Council Tax.

Financial implications

17. The current cost of the CTR Scheme has been factored into the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan with the Council bearing the full cost of its share estimated at £1.9m for 2022-23 from council tax income foregone. The cost of the scheme has already increased due to increased CTR arising from the pandemic, and this may increase further as the cost of living crisis affects people within the city with the burden of paying household bills. Any further increases in the council tax charge in 2022/23 will also lead to increased CTR and reduced income for the Council.

18. The proposed consultation seeks views on changes which affect the future affordability of the scheme. It is worth noting that any changes to the scheme can only affect working age claimants as the scheme for pensioners as set by central government may not be changed. This limits the impact of the total cost of the whole scheme as the council only has the jurisdiction to make changes to part of the expenditure.

The increase in the loss of income from increased council tax support given to claimants does not get accounted for by the authority until the following financial year as it comes through as losses through the Collection Fund.

Legal implications

19. Local Council Tax Support came into effect on 1 April 2013 pursuant to the Local Government Finance Act 1992. Section 13A(2) of that Act (as amended) provides:

'Each billing authority in England must make a scheme specifying the reductions which are to apply to amounts of council tax payable, in respect of dwellings situated in its area, by—

- (a) persons whom the authority considers to be in financial need, or
- (b) persons in classes consisting of persons whom the authority considers to be, in general, in financial need.'

20. Schedule 1A of that Act prescribes what must be included in a Council Tax Reduction Scheme, and places a duty on the authority, each financial year, to consider whether to revise its scheme or replace it with another scheme. The scheme states the classes of person who are to be entitled to a reduction, the type of reduction and whether there are different reductions for different classes. The scheme should also set out the procedure to apply for a reduction and the appeal procedure.

21. Before preparing a scheme, the authority must (in the following order)—

- (a) Consult any major precepting authority which has power to issue a precept to it,
- (b) Publish a draft scheme in such manner as it thinks fit, and
- (c) consult such other persons as it considers are likely to have an interest in the operation of the scheme.

22. The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) 2012 further prescribes what must be included in the scheme.
23. The scheme must be approved by Full Council no later than 11 March before the financial year it relates to. After approval, the scheme must be published.
24. Since the introduction of CTR schemes, there have been a number of legal challenges against other local schemes. Most of these challenges have been in relation to the consultation undertaken and have questioned whether due regard was given to any equality impact assessment when changes were made to schemes. A Supreme Court ruling in 2014 (R. (on the application of Moseley) v London Borough of Haringey) determined that consultation on changes to council tax reduction schemes must provide such information as necessary in order for consultees to express meaningful views on the proposal. Enough had to be said about realistic alternatives, and the reasons for a preferred choice, to enable the consultees to make an intelligent response in respect of the scheme. This would include an option for any current scheme to be retained on the same level of funding with a consequent reduction in funding for other services. There are questions in the consultation paper on these options.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

25. By sending details of the consultation electronically we are reducing the use of paper and reducing the environmental impact of transporting these by post.
26. No other carbon or environmental impacts have been identified as a result of this proposal.

Level of risk

27. A risk register is attached at Appendix 2. The identified risks relate to the undertaking of consultation, rather than the changes to the CTR scheme.

Equalities impact

28. An Initial Equalities Impact Assessment is attached at Appendix 3.

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Background Papers: None