

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 5 December 2024

Title: Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025/26

Report of: Robert Cottrill, Chief Executive

Cabinet member: Councillor Christine Robinson, Deputy Leader of Lewes District Council and Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing

Ward(s): All

Purpose of report: To gain Cabinet's recommendation to Full Council that the 2024/25 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme is adopted as the 2025/26 scheme.

Decision type: Budget and policy framework

Officer recommendation(s):

(1) Cabinet recommend to Full Council that the 2024/25 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme is adopted as the 2025/26 scheme. This is subject to any changes announced in the budget due on 30 October 2024 and annual DWP welfare benefit uprating due in January 2025.

(2) Subject to Full Council adoption of the Scheme, Cabinet grants the Assistant Director for Revenues and Benefits delegated authority–

(a) to implement the Scheme, such delegated authority to include any measures necessary for or incidental to its management and administration; and

(b) if necessary, and in accordance with paragraph 2.3, to amend the Scheme in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets and Community wellbeing

(3) That the Exceptional Hardship Scheme continues in 2025/26 subject to funds being available.

Reasons for recommendations: The Council must review the scheme each year and adopt a scheme for the coming financial year.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The government abolished the national Council Tax Benefit scheme from April 2013 and required local authorities to develop and adopt their own scheme of support for working age claimants. This change came with a 10% cut in funding.
- 1.2 To protect pensioners from any reduction in support, the government put in place a national scheme that local authorities had to adopt. Therefore, any reduction in support had to come from those of working age.
- 1.3 The Council, on 21 February 2022, adopted a revised Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTR) of support for those of working age for 2022/23 which increased the maximum award to 100% of a person's council tax liability, removed the Minimum-Income Floor rules for the self-employed and removed the £5.00 minimum award.

2 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2024/25

- 2.1 The scheme provides financial support to c3,250 of the most disadvantaged working-age residents with help in meeting their council tax liabilities. The changes the Council made to the scheme for 2022/23 means that approximately 2,000 residents do not have to pay any council tax.
- 2.2 The current cost of the scheme, in terms of a reduction in Tax base, is c£8.7m, an increase of around c£40k for Lewes. The total cost is shared by the Council, East Sussex County Council, Sussex Police, East Sussex Fire & Rescue and Town and Parish Councils in relation to their share of Council Tax.

	% share of Council Tax	Cost
East Sussex County Council	70.67%	£6,148,290
Lewes District Council	9.93%	£863,910
Town and Parish Councils	5.40%	£469,800
Sussex Police	9.47%	£823,890
East Sussex Fire and Rescue	4.53%	£394,110

- 2.3 Over the last few years, the government has introduced various schemes of financial support. Firstly, in response to Covid-19 and more recently to address the ongoing Cost-of-Living Crisis. It would be prudent for Cabinet to grant delegated authority to the Assistant Director of Revenues and Benefits to make in-year changes to the scheme, subject to consultation with the Leader. This is to ensure that any future financial support the government puts in place does not reduce the amount of Council Tax Reduction a resident can receive.

Should such a change prove necessary, the Council would inform all major preceptors.

3 Proposal

- 3.1 That the Local Council Tax Reduction scheme 2024/25 is adopted as the scheme for 2025/26. A draft of the proposed scheme is at Appendix 1.
- 3.2 In recognition of the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis and the impact on some Council Taxpayers the Council will continue to provide support through the Exceptional Hardship Payments Scheme.

4 Outcome expected and performance management

- 4.1 That the LCTR scheme supports those on low incomes to meet their Council Tax liabilities and that the Exceptional Hardship Scheme provides additional support to those facing exceptional hardship.
- 4.2 The cost of the LCTR scheme and the Exceptional Hardship scheme will be monitored monthly.

5 Consultation

- 5.1 As there are no revisions to the current scheme, there is no requirement to consult.

6 Corporate plan and council policies

- 6.1 The scheme supports the council's aim of a fairer council tax for those on the lowest incomes.

7 Business case and alternative option(s) considered

- 7.1 No alternatives considered as it is a statutory requirement to have in place a Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

8 Financial appraisal

- 8.1 The Council Tax Reduction Scheme reduces the Council Tax base and thereby the amount of Council Tax that can be collected. The total cost of the scheme is shared through the collection fund between the Council and preceptors. The recommendation in this report is to leave the scheme unchanged and might not have an immediate impact on the Council Tax collected by the Council.
- 8.2 The cost, in terms of a reduction in tax base regarding the 2025/26 scheme will be in the region of £9.1m (2024/25 cost will be in the region of £8.7m set against the total Council Tax debit raised of £98m). The full cost of the discount scheme for 2024/25 will not be known for certain until the end of the financial year and will be dependent on the movement in caseload in year as well as the levels of Council Tax set by the Council and the major precepting authorities.

9 Legal implications

- 9.1 The Council is required by the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (Schedule 1A, paragraph 5) to consider, for each year, whether to revise its council tax reduction scheme or to replace it with another scheme. It is open to the Council to decide to make no changes to the scheme from one financial year to the next.
- 9.2 Under section 67 of the 1992 Act, adoption of a Council Tax Reduction Scheme is reserved to full Council. The role of Cabinet is to consider the proposed revised scheme and make a recommendation to Council.

Date of legal input: 23 October 2024

Legal ref: 013455-LDC-OD

10 Risk management implications

- 10.1 The main risk to the Council is that the cost of the scheme rises substantially. This could happen if there is an upturn in the number of people who become eligible for, and claim, CTR. This risk must be accepted as the Council has no mechanism to prevent this happening.

11 Equality analysis

- 11.1 An Equality Analysis was carried out on the 2022/23 scheme. As there are no proposed changes to the scheme, it remains the case that working age people would benefit from the proposed changes, promoting greater equality throughout age groups, with those adversely impacted financially through the cost-of-living crisis potentially eligible for this financial relief.

12 Environmental sustainability implications

- 12.1 There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

13 Contribution to Community Wealth Building

- 13.1 Reducing the amount of Council Tax that the most financially challenged have to pay increases their disposable income which could be spent on goods and services in the local area thus increasing employment opportunities and contribute to business growth.

14 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025/26

15 Background papers

The background papers used in compiling this report were as follows:

- None