

Report to Council

Subject: Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Date: 24 January 2024

Author: Housing and Welfare Manager

Purpose

This report seeks approval for the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) to continue without revision in 2024/25.

Recommendation(s)

THAT:

- The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) 2024/25, to apply from 1 April 2024, be approved and adopted by full Council, and

That there are no changes to the CTRS for working age people as described in Section 2 of this report, except for the annual uprating and amendments of allowances and premiums in line with Housing Benefit levels; and

That there are no changes to CTRS for pension age people except for those contained within the annual Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Amendment) (England) Regulations.

1 Background

1.1 Members will recall that from 1 April 2013, the Council Tax Benefit Scheme was replaced by a localised support scheme for Council Tax known as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS). All billing authorities (district and unitary authorities) were required to devise their own scheme for working age claimants. Pensioners are protected by Government legislation and continue to receive discount equivalent to that received under the Council Tax Benefit Scheme i.e. up to 100%.

1.2 On 19 December 2012, following a full consultation exercise, Gedling Borough Council adopted a Council Tax Reduction Scheme very similar to the previous national Council Tax Benefits scheme, enabling a maximum

award entitlement of up to 100% discount but with the following main differences for working age claimants:

- a) No entitlement to CTRS for claimants whose savings were greater than £6,000.
 - b) Removal of the Second Adult Rebate Scheme.
 - c) A flat rate non-dependant deduction of £7.50 for each adult member of the household.
 - d) Automatic backdating of CTRS for a maximum of 3 months; and
 - e) Entitlement to the extended payments “back to work” incentive for the long term unemployed, increased from four weeks to twelve weeks.
- 1.3 On 22 January 2014, Council resolved to adopt a CTRS that included provision to allow for the annual uprating of allowances and premiums without this being classed as a material change to the scheme.
- 1.4 Since 22 January 2014 the Council has continued with its CTRS without material change, and this is the scheme currently in use by the Council.
- 1.5 Paragraph 5 of Schedule 1A to the Local Government Finance Act 1992 requires the Council to consider whether the CTRS is to be revised or replaced for each financial year. The Act required that where the scheme is to be revised or replaced, the Council has to have made a decision no later than 31 January in the financial year preceding that for which the revision or replacement scheme is to have effect.
- 1.6 The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (Amendment) England S.I. 2017 No. 1305 amended the date of 31 January to 11 March to allow for a longer period of consideration and consultation if required.

Funding Arrangements

- 1.7 At the outset of the CTRS scheme in 2013/14 Central Government provided non-ring-fenced grant funding to Gedling via the Revenue Support Grant mechanism. Revenue Support Grant was reduced year on year and was fully removed from the 2019/20 financial settlement.
- 1.8 Since 2013/14, the resulting shortfall in funding of the CTRS has had to be met by a combination of:
- Raising more income through further changes to Council Tax empty property discounts/premiums.
 - Additional income through the Business Rates Retention Scheme.
 - Raising income or reducing expenditure through other service area efficiencies.

- 1.9 The other option for meeting any shortfall in funding is to reduce the total spend on the CTRS i.e. change from a 100% scheme.
- 1.10 The 2023/24 scheme was agreed by full Council in January 2023 based on an expenditure forecast of £7.55m. This is now expected to be around £7.65m at the year-end (March 2024). An additional £200K in hardship awards are also projected to have been awarded for 2023/24.
- The costs of CTRS are proportionately shared by the Council and the major preceptors.
- 1.11 The economic outlook for 2024/25 remains weak with GDP growth projected to be minimal as high price inflation continues. Council tax increases are also expected to be applied by the major preceptors in 2024/25 and therefore CTRS expenditure is expected to increase above 2023/24 levels.

Hardship Funding

- 1.12 During 2020/21 the Government recognised some of the financial challenges being faced by working families as a result of Covid-19 and provided Council Tax Hardship funding of £873,000 which the Council used to reduce 2020/21 Council Tax liabilities for working families in receipt of CTRS by up to £450.
- 1.13 There was sufficient Council Tax Hardship funding remaining in 2021/22 to enable the Council to provide all recipients of working age council tax reduction scheme (CTRS) support during the financial year 2021/22 with a reduction in their annual council tax bill of up to £50.
- 1.14 For 2022/23 The Council agreed to award a contribution of up to £30 in Council Tax Hardship to further reduce Council Tax liabilities. The allocation was not Government funded and therefore all expenditure was subsidised from the Councils own financial reserves. The awards were distributed to both working and pensioner age client's groups whereas the 2020/21 and 2021/22 awards were only made to the working age sector.
- 1.15 During 2023/24 the Government recognised the ongoing financial challenges being faced and provided Council Tax Hardship funding of £172,624 which the Council is using to reduce 2023/24 Council Tax liabilities for households in receipt of CTRS by up to £75.00.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 An objective review of the CTRS for the 2024/25 financial year has been completed and has considered alternative options for amending the current CTRS against the backdrop of the financial challenges continuing to be faced by working families.

- 2.2 Of the £7.65m estimated 2023/24 cost of the CTRS, £3.15m is awarded to those customers of a pensionable age with £4.50m awarded to the working age client group.

Any reductions to the Council's CTRS expenditure are only available in respect of our Working Age claimants as pensioners are 100% protected.

- 2.3 The total number of working age claimants is in the region of 4,349 households on low incomes, of which 1,649 are classed as Vulnerable groups. "Vulnerable Groups" are households where the claimant or their partner is in receipt of Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payments, or the household includes a disabled child.

Review of the options

- 2.4 There is a fine balance between the cost of the scheme, the available funding, and the ability of people on low incomes being able to afford to pay their council tax. As the current CTRS offers a maximum award of 100% any alternative option is based upon reducing the level of financial support to low income working age claimants which may then deliver a saving for the Council.

- 2.5 The individual option that would generate the highest saving for the Council and which would be simple to administer, would be to reduce the current maximum entitlement from 100% to, for example, 90% or 80% therefore requiring all working age households to pay a minimum of at least 10% or 20% of their annual council tax bill. For example, each household in a Band A property in a non-parished area, who currently has a zero Council Tax charge, would be required to pay £302.38 pa if the maximum award is reduced to 80%. The total annual savings that would be generated and shared proportionately by the Council and major preceptors would be in the region of:

- Reducing the maximum award to 90% would make a saving of £512,515 (GBC saving of 8.09% amounts to £41,462).
- Reducing the maximum award to 80% would make a saving of £1,011,451 (GBC saving 8.09% amounts to £81,826).

- 2.6 Whilst these savings in total are significant, this would require low-income households to start paying Council Tax that have not done so before, and this will require an increase in administration resources to manage the additional collection and recovery workload, particularly as Council Tax arrears would be expected to increase. This could negate any anticipated savings for Gedling, because Gedling will pay the full costs of the additional

officers whilst only keeping our share (8.09%) of any additional amount collected.

- 2.7 Many Councils that have implemented this option, including some in Nottinghamshire, have previously reported that their Council Tax in-year collection rate decreased and that this was entirely due to their scheme change so it is probable that the savings detailed above would be lower, particularly in the early years of the introduction of such a change. Nationally, studies have shown that if the Council was minded to change the scheme, the best results in terms of maintaining cash collection levels would be to incrementally change the scheme e.g. a 10% reduction in year one and then reducing the scheme year on year.
- 2.8 Nationally and locally, households reliant on financial support such as the CTRS are considered some of the most financially vulnerable residents. For Gedling, this has been evidenced by the increase in claimant reliance on the Council's Discretionary Housing Payments scheme and the Housing Needs Repossession Prevention Support scheme. Consequently, these households would have even greater difficulty than other households in being able to afford increases in their expenditure, and it would therefore be more likely that their Council Tax would remain unpaid. It would also be more difficult to collect, and households may be subject to court action and associated Magistrates Court and Enforcement Agency fees.
- 2.9 The Department for Levelling UP, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) have previously issued guidance on administrative matters to be considered in any CTRS, such as duties to vulnerable people, and that schemes should contain work incentives. Gedling's CTRS currently contains all of these in the form of income and earnings disregards (in line with housing benefit levels) and protection from restricted liability for severely disabled people.

Conclusion

- 2.10 It is concluded that a reduction in CTRS for Gedling's most financially vulnerable households combined with the difficulties of collection, when compared to the potential savings for Gedling, would not yield any major financial or social benefit for the Council at a time of economic uncertainty.
- 2.11 It is proposed that the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme continues for the financial year 2024/25 without revision, except for any relevant national uprating which is covered within the current scheme, enabling the current maximum award entitlement to continue at 100% discount to ensure our financially vulnerable households continue to be supported.

3 Alternative Options

- 3.1 There are a variety of alternative options available to amend the CTRS which are shown at Appendix 1, all of which require a reduction in financial support to working age claimants, and which in the current financial climate, are not recommended. The option that individually delivers the largest reduction in CTRS support is the percentage reduction in the award, as detailed in paragraph 2.5 above.
- 3.2 The implementation of any proposed change to the CTRS would be subject to a period of public consultation.
- 3.3 There is not the option to do nothing, as the Council is required to make a decision on this matter by 11 March 2024.

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 The total discounts given under the CTRS are estimated to be £7.8m for the 2024/25 financial year, of which Gedling's share is £0.63m. The Council's current MTFP assumes continuation of the CTRS without revision and does not anticipate any savings from a change to the scheme. This indicates affordability of the scheme in 2024/25, if agreed by Council.

5 Legal Implications

- 5.1 Section 13A of The Local Government Finance Act 1992 ("the Act") requires billing authorities to make a scheme specifying the reductions which apply to amounts of council tax payable (CTRS). Schedule 1A of the Act, and regulations made thereunder, provide the statutory framework for billing authorities in relation to the CTRS and provide detail as to what must and what could be included in a CTRS.

The Act requires authorities for each financial year to consider whether to revise or replace its CTRS by 11 March in the preceding financial year. This report reflects that statutory consideration.

6 Equalities Implications

- 6.1 The Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) for the Scheme has been reviewed with no issues identified and is shown in Appendix 2.

7 Carbon Reduction/Environmental Sustainability Implications

- 7.1 None arising.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1 – Alternative options

Appendix 2 - Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

9 Background Papers

9.1 Current Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

10 Reasons for Recommendations

10.1 To comply with the requirements of Paragraph 5 of Schedule 1A to the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012/2885.

Statutory Officer approval

Approved by Chief Financial Officer:

Date:

Approved by the Monitoring Officer:

Date:

