

Decision Maker:	Cabinet	Date:
Title:	Local Council Tax Support Scheme Proposals 2025/26	Thursday, 5 September 2024
Portfolio Holder:	Portfolio Holder for Finance and Economy Cllr Neil Hargreaves	
Report Author:	Gareth Robinson – Interim Director Finance, Revenues and Benefits grobinson@uttlesford.gov.uk	Key decision: No

Summary

1. There is a requirement to annually review the Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) Scheme and propose changes to the scheme for the following financial year. The decisions made, even if no change is proposed, must then be consulted upon before a decision is taken at Full Council in December on the final scheme for the following financial year.
2. A consultation will be carried out during the autumn of 2024 on the scheme proposals to set a contribution rate and continue to protect Vulnerable and Disabled residents and Carer's on a low income.
3. As can be seen from the table in paragraph 16, Uttlesford has administered the scheme with the lowest percentage contribution requirement of any authority in Essex for eleven years. This demonstrates that whilst the council has had sufficient funds to support the scheme it has done so.
4. In 2013/14 when the original scheme was introduced the contribution rate was set at 8.5%. This increased in 2014/15 to 12.5% and it has remained at this rate for each subsequent year.
5. The Exceptional Hardship Fund is available to support residents and claimants who are suffering financial hardship.
6. As part of Blueprint Uttlesford, a full review of the LCTS scheme will take place between now and June 2025. Any potential changes to the scheme will be modelled and consulted upon during summer 2025 ready for implementation, if applicable on 1st April 2026. Scheme changes are aimed at reducing the cost of administering the scheme rather than reducing the amount of resource available to LCTS claimants overall.

Recommendations

7. The Cabinet is requested to recommend the Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025/26 is consulted on the following basis:
 - I. The contribution rate is frozen at 12.5% for 2025/26.
 - II. The Council continues to protect Pensioners, Vulnerable and Disabled Residents and their Carer's on a low income.

Financial Implications

8. Detailed in the main body of this report.

Background Papers

9. None

Impact

Communication/Consultation	Proposals subject to public consultation and discussions with major preceptors
Community Safety	None.
Equalities	An equalities impact assessment will be completed as part of developing final proposals for decisions by Cabinet and the Council later in the year.
Health and Safety	None.
Human Rights/Legal Implications	Compliance with relevant legislation.
Sustainability	The objective is to achieve a financially sustainable set of arrangements.
Ward-specific impacts	None.
Workforce/Workplace	Ongoing demands on the Revenues & Benefits, Housing and Customer Service teams

Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) current scheme

9. LCTS replaced Council Tax Benefit (CTB) from 1 April 2013. The Council has adopted a scheme which has the following key elements:

- a) Pensioners on low income protected from adverse changes (as required by Government)
- b) Disabled people, Carers and blind people on a low income receive discretionary protection from adverse changes
- c) Working age people previously on full CTB pay no more than 12.5% of the council tax bill

- d) £25 per week of earned wages income disregarded from assessment (to provide a work incentive)
- e) Child Benefit and Child Maintenance disregarded from assessment (to minimise exacerbation of child poverty, or accusations of same)
- f) Hardship Policy to enable additional support for genuine extreme hardship cases.

Essex Sharing Agreement

- 10. An Essex wide income sharing agreement was entered into with all billing authorities and major preceptors at the time of implementation of the new LCTS scheme.
- 11. The main principles of the agreement are to ensure a joint approach in maximising income collection, reduce fraud, ensure compliance, and increase the taxbase.
- 12. By working proactively on fraud this ensures that our tax base is maintained at the maximum level generating extra revenue for both the major preceptors and billing authorities.
- 13. Preceptors receive a share of all income generated for Council Tax and this is allocated through the Collection Fund at year end.
- 14. The increased income generated specifically from these activities and internal decisions made by UDC each year is monitored by ECC, and the preceptors have agreed to share their element of the increased income with the Local Authorities.
- 15. The major preceptors also provide funding through this agreement for;
 - a) an officer to ensure the efficient administration of the LCTS scheme and provide claimants with dedicated support in debt management.
 - b) two officers to work directly on all areas of fraud and compliance within Council Tax.
 - c) contributions towards the Exceptional Hardship Scheme which has a £17,000 annual budget (£10,000 UDC element), plus Essex County Council provide an additional £5,000 for admin support.

Contribution Rates across Essex

- 16. The council has the lowest percentage contribution rate within Essex with the highest being set at 30%.

Contribution Rates 2024/25			
		%	%
Basildon	25	Harlow	24
Braintree	23	Maldon	20
Brentwood	25	Rochford	25
Castle Point	30	Southend-on-Sea	25
Chelmsford	23	Tendring	20
Colchester	20	Thurrock	25
Epping Forest	25	Uttlesford	12.5

17. It is too early to tell if any other Local Authorities will reduce their contribution rates for the next financial year, this information should be available for the December Cabinet report along with the main consultation responses.

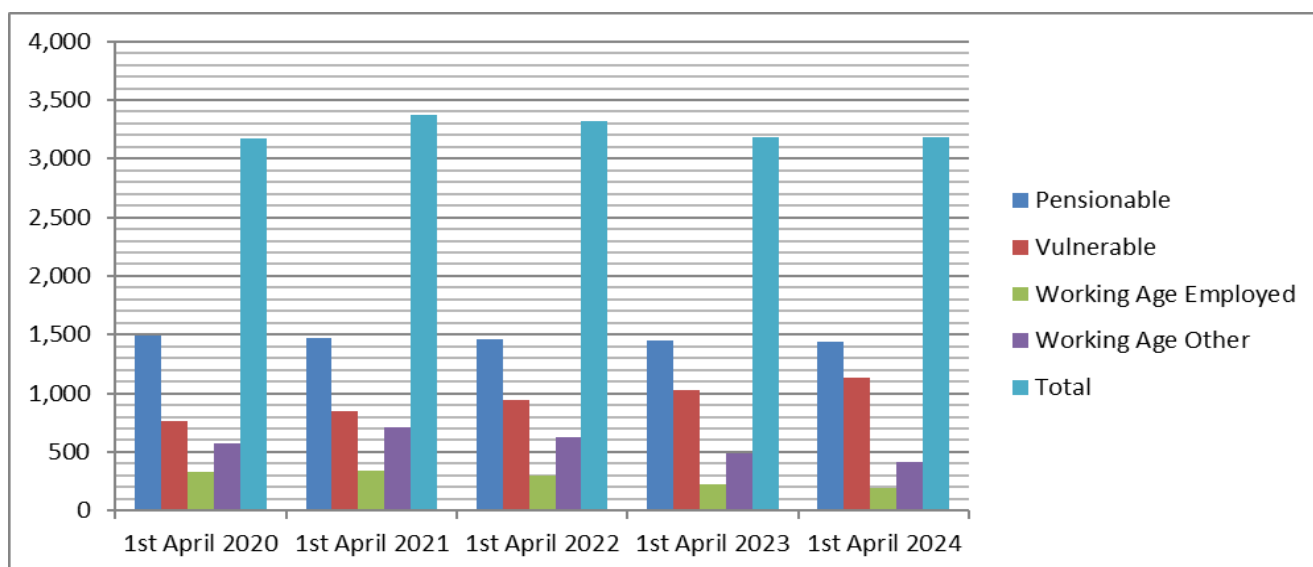
Claimant Caseload

18. The data and figures used in the following tables are based on 2024/25 caseload information on 1 April 2024

The following table and graph provide an analysis of each category of claimant and how the caseloads have changed over the past 5 years.

	1st April 2020	1st April 2021	1st April 2022	1st April 2023	1st April 2024
Pensionable	1,497	1,466	1,458	1,452	1,442
Vulnerable	766	851	943	1,027	1,137
Working Age Employed	331	337	297	223	188
Working Age Other	577	714	627	485	416
Total	3,171	3,368	3,325	3,187	3,183

	1/4/20	1/4/21	In year movement	1/4/22	In year movement	1/4/23	In year movement	1/4/24	In year movement
Pensionable	1497	1,466	-31	1,458	-8	1,452	-6	1,442	-10
Vulnerable/Disabled	766	851	85	943	92	1,027	84	1,137	110
Working Age - Employed	331	337	6	297	-40	223	-74	188	-35
Working Age - Other	577	714	137	627	-87	485	-142	416	-69
Total Claimants	3171	3368	197	3325	-43	3,187	-138	3,183	-4



19. The overall number of claimants has reduced for the third year in a row, with the biggest decrease seen in the working age category. This category is expected to continue to decrease as the Department for Work and Pensions continues to migrate claimants to Universal Credit.
20. The overall decrease in caseload is offset by the vulnerable and disabled category where there is a further increase this year in the numbers of people requiring support. This category has shown an annual increase year on year for five years.

Contribution Rate

22. The contribution rate at 12.5% currently generates approximately £202,247 per year for the Council and the major preceptors, of the total income generated the council receives approximately £28,013 in line with their percentage share of the overall council tax income. This calculation uses an average award, so depending on caseload this income figure could increase or decrease over the year. All figures include the parish precepting element, which is then passed over to the borough's parishes and town councils.
23. The table below sets out the additional income of an increase to the contribution rate to preceptors and is shown in 2.5% increments. Each 2.5% increase will generate additional income of £40,486 of which the council will receive £5,603 in line with their percentage share of the overall council tax income.

Income increases to preceptors.

Contribution	Percentage Average liability income due £'000	Increased income @ 2.5% increments £'000	UDC share of increased income @ 2.5% increment £'000
12.50%	£188,191	-	-
15%	£225,830	£40,486	£5,603
17.50%	£263,468	£80,972	£11,205
20%	£301,106	£121,457	£16,808

*Income collection ranges from 87% to 90% so the actual income received is likely to be lower than the figures in the above table.

Cost impact to claimants.

24. It is impossible to identify and calculate precise figures for each claimant as the contribution level varies dependant on the claimant's financial circumstances and this can change multiple times during the year.
25. The figures in the table below are shown for a working age unemployed person in receipt of full LCTS support, 87.5% discount. So this is the impact of the minimum payment that would be required to be made.

Percentage Contribution	Total cost per year £	Total cost per week £	Increase @ 2.5% per year £	Increase @ 2.5% per week £
12.50%	279.37	5.37	-	-
15%	335.24	6.45	£55.87	£1.07
17.50%	391.11	7.52	£111.74	£2.15
20%	446.98	8.60	£167.61	£3.22

26. The table in paragraph 18 shows the number of people in receipt of LCTS support, for the working age categories, 416 unemployed compared to 188 in work (low income and/or part time). The increase in the contribution rate will affect both working age categories.

Exceptional Hardship Fund (EHF) and Cost of Living Support

27. The Council holds a ring-fenced budget specifically to support all residents who are suffering financial hardship due to unforeseen circumstances, and you do not have to be eligible for LCTS to make an EHF claim. The EHF is supported by the major preceptors as part of the Essex Sharing Agreement.

28. The annual budget held for this fund is £17,000 with UDC contributing £10,000 and the major preceptors contributing £7,000, Essex County Council also provide a further £5,000 to support the administration of the fund.

29. The EHF is subject to award criteria and supports all residents who find themselves in financial difficulties, you do not have to be in receipt of LCTS to qualify, making this scheme fully inclusive to all residents. Full details can be found using the following link: <https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/ehf>

30. It is recommended that the EHF fund is used to provide additional financial support to residents rather than reducing the contribution rate.

Full cost of LCTS scheme (estimated)

31. The following table shows that the forecast financial position for UDC in 2025/26 will be an estimated net cost of £403,172. The costing has been based on the current caseload expenditure as of 1 April 2024 and the preceptor share back estimate on 2024/25 predicted collection rates.

32. The expenditure figure in the table is based on the contribution rate of 12.5%.

LCTS Exp 2023/24	County, Fire and Police Share	UDC Share 2023/24		LCTS Exp 2024/25	County, Fire and Police Share	UDC Share 2024/25
3,973,703	3,392,773	544,930	LCTS Discounts	4,235,581	3,649,428	586,153
0	0	(209,034)	Major Preceptors Income share back	0	0	(204,981)
3,973,703	3,392,773	335,896	Net of LCTS Scheme & Discounts	4,235,581	3,649,428	381,172

120,000	103,000	17,000	Staff support costs (Fraud, Compliance and Recovery)	120,000	103,000	17,000
17,000	7,000	10,000	LCTS Hardship Scheme	17,000	7,000	10,000
0	0	(5,000)	LCTS Hardship Scheme - ECC Admin support	0	0	(5,000)
4,110,703	3,502,773	357,896	Total Net Cost	4,372,581	3,759,428	403,172

Consultation Process

34. The consultation will run for the period 16th September to 28th October 2024 and the full consultation report will be presented to Cabinet on the 5th of December 2024.
35. The consultation will be carried out using an online form using an open text box format and for those who do not use digital services, paper copies will be available on request.
36. The consultation will be extensively publicised via a press release to all local media and newspapers, E-newsletters were sent to all the subscribers on our mailing lists. In addition, the consultation will be promoted on Facebook and Twitter.
37. The major preceptors, (Essex County Council, Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner) and Town and Parish Councils will be sent an email directly inviting them to provide their views on the proposals.

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Assumptions about costs and income levels are incorrect	3 - a high degree of variability and estimation is involved	3 - adverse or favourable cost affecting the council budget/collection fund	Monitor trends closely and review scheme each year to make necessary adjustments.
Cost of living and the effect of inflation on the economy longer term	2 - possible that there will be more claims by residents struggling with everyday costs	2 – cost of the scheme will increase	Monitor caseload and work with preceptors on managing the scheme and impacts

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.