



Report of the Section 151 Officer

Council – 23 January 2020

Adoption of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Purpose:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To explain the requirement to annually consider whether to revise or replace the Council's existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the requirement to either adopt a new scheme or re-adopt the existing scheme by 31 January 2020.2. To re-adopt the current scheme as set out in Section 3 of the report from 2020/21.
Policy Framework:	None
Consultation:	Legal, Finance and Access to Services.
Recommendation:	<p>It is recommended that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The Council Tax Reduction Schemes and Prescribed Requirements (Wales) Regulations 2013 ("the Prescribed Requirements Regulations") by the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) on 26 November 2013, as amended be noted.2. The amendments to "the Prescribed Requirements Regulations" contained in The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements and Default Scheme) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, considered and approved by NAfW on 7 January 2020 be noted.3. The outcome of the consultation exercise undertaken by the Council in November 2018 on the discretionary areas of the current scheme be noted.4. The current scheme (2019/20) in relation to the discretionary areas (as set out in section 3) remain unchanged from 2020/21.

5. The Council adopts the scheme as set out in section 3 of this report and that any amendments to the regulations made by NAFW are reflected in the scheme.

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1 Background

1.1 Following the abolition of the national Council Tax Benefit scheme on 31 March 2013, responsibility for providing Council Tax support in Wales was devolved to the Welsh Government (WG) and is known as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS).

1.2 The CTRS is governed by two sets of regulations. These regulations prescribe the main features of the schemes to be adopted in Wales:-

- The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Default Scheme) (Wales) Regulations 2013 (“the Default Scheme Regulations”) as amended.
- The Council Tax Reduction Schemes and Prescribed Requirements (Wales) Regulations 2013 (“the Prescribed Requirements Regulations”) as amended.

1.3 The regulations contain an obligation that an authority must consider each financial year whether to revise its scheme or to replace it with another scheme. Any revision or replacement must be made no later than 31 January, preceding the financial year for which the revision or replacement scheme will take effect.

1.4 Although there is a national scheme for Wales, within the Prescribed Requirements Regulations, there is limited discretion given to the Council to apply additional discretionary elements that are more generous than the national scheme. These are :-

- The ability to increase the standard extended reduction period of 4 weeks given for example to persons who have ceased to receive qualifying benefits after they return to work, where they have previously been receiving a Council Tax Reduction (CTR) that is to end as a result of their return to work;
- Discretion to increase the amount of War Disablement Pensions and War Widows and War Widowers Pensions which is to be disregarded when calculating income of the applicant; and

- The ability to backdate applications for CTR for periods longer than the standard period of three months before the claim is made.
- 1.5 The Council adopted a CTRS from 2019/20 on 24 January 2019. It is a requirement of the Prescribed Requirements Regulations that the Council adopts a CTRS by 31 January 2020, regardless of whether it applies any of the discretionary elements set out in paragraph 1.4 above. If the Council fails to make a scheme, then a default scheme shall apply under the provisions of the Default Scheme Regulations. The Council can only apply discretion if it makes its own scheme under the Prescribed Requirements Regulations.
- 1.6 An amending set of regulations was laid before the NAFW on 26 November 2019, to uprate financial figures used to assess CTR entitlement, in line with the cost of living increases. The amending set of regulations also incorporate changes to reflect consequential and technical amendments required to take account of inter-related changes to welfare benefits and other legislation made by the UK Government.
- 1.7 The amendment regulations were approved by the Assembly on 7 January 2020. The Council must take account of these regulations, The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements and Default Scheme) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2020¹, when adopting the scheme.

¹ These regulations can be accessed at:

<http://senedd.assembly.wales/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=27013&Opt=0>

2 Consultation

- 2.1 A consultation exercise on the discretionary elements within the CTR scheme was conducted over the period 5 November 2018 to 2 December 2018 and advertised in a press release. An on-line survey form was placed on the Council web-site and consultation forms were available at the Contact Centre, District Housing Offices and libraries. Information was also sent to members, precepting authorities and various third sector agencies. A summary of the responses to this consultation can be found in Appendix A.
- 2.2 The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements and Default Scheme) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, approved by NAFW 20 January 2015, included a change which removed the requirement for Local Authorities to publish a draft scheme and consult interested persons where a Billing Authority revises a scheme in consequence of amendments made to the Prescribed Requirement Regulations. The effect of this amendment is to remove the requirement for local authorities to consult in relation to changes made by Welsh Ministers where authorities have no discretion (as opposed to the discretionary areas of the scheme outlined in 1.4).

2.3 As this report contains a recommendation that the current scheme is not replaced or changed from 2020/2021, other than to include amendments contained in the “Amendment Regulations” (explained in 1.6 above), there is no requirement for the Council to consult, as authorities have no discretion in relation to these amendments.

3 Adoption of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme

3.1 The Council is required to adopt a scheme by 31 January 2020 under the Council Tax Reduction Schemes and Prescribed Requirements (Wales) Regulations 2013 as amended, regardless of whether it chooses to apply any of the discretionary elements. If the Council fails to make a scheme, then a default scheme will apply under the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Default Scheme) (Wales) Regulations 2013 (as amended).

3.2 As explained in 1.6 above, each year WG needs to amend the CTRS 2013 Regulations to ensure that the assessment calculation for CTR recipients is up-rated. The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements and Default Scheme) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were laid on 26 November 2019. As well as the up-rating provisions, these “Amendment Regulations” incorporate various technical and consequential amendments.

3.3 It is recommended that the Council adopts a Scheme from 2020/21 under “the Prescribed Requirements Regulations”, and any amendments made to those regulations by the “Amendment Regulations”, to include all the elements that must be included in the scheme and those discretionary elements set out in the table at Paragraph 3.5 below.

3.4 Part 5 of the Council Tax Reduction Schemes and Prescribed Requirements (Wales) Regulations 2013 (Other matters that must be included in an authority’s scheme) identifies which elements of the prescribed requirements of a scheme are minimum only requirements and in respect of which local authorities have an element of discretion.

3.5 Taking account of :

- the consultation responses for the current local scheme, (see Appendix A) relating to the discretionary elements, noting that no changes have been proposed for 2020/21.
- the current local scheme in relation to the treatment of War Disablement Pensions, War Widows Pensions and War Widowers Pensions for Housing Benefit, which disregards these payments in full,
- the fixed funding available,

The recommendations in relation to the available discretionary elements are as follows in the table below:-

<u>Discretionary Elements</u> Part 5 - Other Matters that must be included in an authority's scheme	Prescribed Requirement Regulations (Minimum Requirements)	Recommended Details to be Adopted with regard to Discretionary Elements
<p>The ability to increase the standard extended reduction period of 4 weeks given to applicants where they have previously been receiving a CTR that is to end, as they have ceased receiving qualifying benefits as a result of returning to work, increasing their hours of work, or receiving increased earnings.</p> <p><i>Regulation 32 (3) and Regulation 33 (3), para (33) Schedule 1 and para (35) and (40) Schedule 6.</i></p>	<p>4 Weeks</p>	<p><u>Pensioners</u>: The 4 weeks period specified in para (33) Schedule 1 will apply, and</p> <p><u>Non- Pensioners</u>: The 4 weeks period specified in para (35) and (40) Schedule 6 will apply,</p>
<p>The ability to backdate applications of CTR for periods longer than the standard period of 3 months before the claim is made.</p> <p><i>Regulation 34 (4) and Paragraph (3) and (4) of Schedule 13.</i></p>	<p>3 Months</p>	<p><u>Pensioners</u>: The period of 3 months specified in para (3) Schedule 13 will apply,</p> <p><u>Non-Pensioners</u>: The period of 3 months specified in para (4), Schedule 13 will apply,</p>
<p>The ability to disregard more than the statutory weekly £10 of income received in respect of War Disablement Pensions and War Widows Pensions and War Widowers Pensions (disregarded when calculating income of the applicant);</p> <p><i>Regulation 34 (5), Paragraphs 1(a) and 1(b) Schedule 4 and Paragraphs 20(a) and 20(b) of Schedule 9</i></p>	<p>£10</p>	<p><u>Pensioners</u>: The total value of any pension specified in para 1(a) and 1(b) Schedule 4 will be disregarded.</p> <p><u>Non-Pensioners</u>: The total value of any pension specified in para 20(a) and 20(b) Schedule 9 will be disregarded.</p>

4. Equality and Engagement Implications

4.1 The Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (Wales) and must, in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Our Equality Impact Assessment process ensures that we have paid due regard to the above.

- 4.2 The WG undertook a comprehensive regulatory impact assessment in respect of the national Scheme regulations, in November 2013.
- 4.3 The Council has undertaken a fresh consultation exercise in relation to the discretionary elements in November 2018 as a matter of good practice as the previous consultation exercise had been carried out in 2014.
- 4.4 A local equality impact assessment (EIA) was carried out by the Council in January 2014, for the 2014/15 scheme, which was reviewed each year since then as there were no changes to the discretionary elements in any of the subsequent amendment regulations.
- 4.5 A fresh local equality impact assessment (EIA) was carried out by the Council in December 2018 to keep the EIA in line with the most recent consultation exercise and to update the format of the report.
- 4.6 It should be noted that in terms of equality impact there are no significant changes in the scheme recommended from 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. As this is a national scheme, the Council cannot vary the provisions other than those discretionary areas detailed in 1.4 above, which are proposed to remain the same as exist in the current (2019/20) local scheme. The Revenues and Benefits service will continue to provide advice to maximise taxpayers' benefit income, award appropriate discounts and exemptions and signpost customers to relevant agencies, where appropriate, so they can obtain independent advice.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Welsh local authorities receive a fixed sum provision from WG for the CTRS. This is fundamentally different to the funding received from DWP, for the former Council Tax Benefit scheme, which was demanded and almost fully funded on a pound for pound basis. Any changes that affect the amount of CTR to be paid, for example due to Council Tax increases, increases in customers' CTR entitlement or increases in the number of customers actually claiming CTR, exposes the Council to financial risk, as the shortfall between the amount of CTR paid out and the funding received from WG, result in authorities having to bear the additional cost.
- 5.2 The table below shows the number of current CTR recipients in Swansea, the latest estimate of CTR paid for 2019/20 and the latest estimated shortfall of £2.382M which has to be met by the Council.

Current CTR recipients	Current CTR recipients who receive 100% CTR	Latest estimate of CTR to be paid in 2019/20	Fixed funding received from WG for 2019/20	Estimated shortfall between funding and CTR paid to recipients.
22,384	17,858	£21.463M	£19.081M	-£2.382M

- 5.3 The amount of CTR funding for distribution in 2020/21 in Wales was detailed in the provisional settlement made on 16 December 2019. The funding available for the whole of Wales is £244M with this Council's provisional allocation being £19.012M.
- 5.4 The table in 5.2 shows the estimated shortfall between the CTR to be paid out and the fixed funding received from WG for 2019/20.
- 5.5 Based on these figures, for every 1% increase in Council Tax levels in 2020/21, the yield will be reduced by an estimated £214,636 to reflect the cost of the CTRS.

6. Legal Implications

The Council is obliged to make a CTRS under the Prescribed Requirements Regulations as amended by 31 January 2020. Although the legislation provides for a default scheme to apply in the absence of the Council making a scheme, the Council is nevertheless under a statutory duty to adopt its own scheme, even if it chooses not to apply any of the discretionary elements.

Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires Local Authorities to have "due regard" to their public sector equality duties when exercising their functions.

There are no other legal implications other than those already highlighted in this report.

Background Papers:
Equality Impact Assessment

Appendices:
Appendix A: Summary of the responses to the CTRS consultation undertaken in November 2018.