

Council Tax Reduction Scheme Consultation 2016

Blackpool Council



In:fusion

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1 Executive Summary

78 people responded to the consultation on proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, including a mix of claimants, non-claimants and pensioners in the borough.

More respondents agreed than disagreed with all proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The highest level of agreement was for reducing the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Reduction to four weeks, whilst the lowest level of agreement, relatively, was for the proposal to remove entitlement to the Severe Disability Premium where another person is paid Universal Credit.

Comments suggest agreement is generally driven by a view that the changes would make the scheme fairer and equal for all residents, whilst any disagreement tended to relate to the impact that the proposals might have on some residents, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Figure 1.1: Summary of agreement levels for each proposal (actual numbers)

	Strongly agree or agree	Strongly disagree or disagree	Don't know
To reduce the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Council Tax Reduction to four weeks	56	17	3
To give additional support to vulnerable groups in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme	54	14	6
Overall agreement with proposed approach to align with Housing Benefit	45	16	12
To limit the number of dependent children within the calculation for Council Tax Reduction to a maximum of two	45	24	7
To reduce the element of a Work Related Activity Component in the calculation of the current scheme for new ESA applicants	41	21	14
To remove entitlement to the Severe Disability Premium where another person is paid Universal Credit (Carers Element) to look after them	40	25	9

2 Background and Methodology

2.1 Background

The Council's local Council Tax Reduction Scheme replaced Council Tax Benefits from April 2013. The Council's scheme is based on the previous Housing/Council Tax Benefit Scheme, approved by Full Council in December 2012 after consultation was undertaken with residents of Blackpool, the Police, Fire Authority and other interested parties. The old Council Tax Benefit scheme was retained within the local reduction scheme and it has continued to protect pensioners, as prescribed by Central Government.

Central Government announced a number of welfare changes in its 2015 Summer Budget, some of these changes apply to the Housing Benefit Scheme. Blackpool Council is proposing that its Council Tax Reduction Scheme continues to align with the Housing Benefit Scheme and that the maximum % reduction does not change, but remains at 72.89%. This will aid an efficient/streamlined scheme and will mean that the Council would not have to consider changing the level of reduction or find savings from other Council services to cover additional administration costs.

2.2 Methodology

The Council agreed to undertake a consultation with residents and stakeholders in Blackpool to understand what impact, if any, the proposed changes would have on local people and to consider any alternative suggestions. The consultation comprised of an online survey which was made available on the Council website and supported by a range of communication, including an article in the Your Blackpool newsletter which is delivered to every household in the borough, social media updates and press releases. In addition, paper copies were made available in public buildings to ensure those residents who do not use the internet could access the consultation and independent research fieldworkers undertook face-to-face interviews in the Customer First centre in the final week of the consultation. The consultation went live on 22 August and closed on 16 October 2016, a period of 8 weeks.

78 responses were received to the consultation survey. Tables and charts within this report refer to actual number of respondents to ensure reliable interpretation of the findings.

In addition, the council consulted with its Council Tax preceptors and received a response from the Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service. This supported proposals which would align the Reduction Scheme with Housing Benefit, but expressed concern for the proposal to provide additional support to some vulnerable groups based on their potential loss of income as a result. In particular they expressed particular concern about the potential impact on them if all Lancashire authorities chose to adopt a similar scheme.

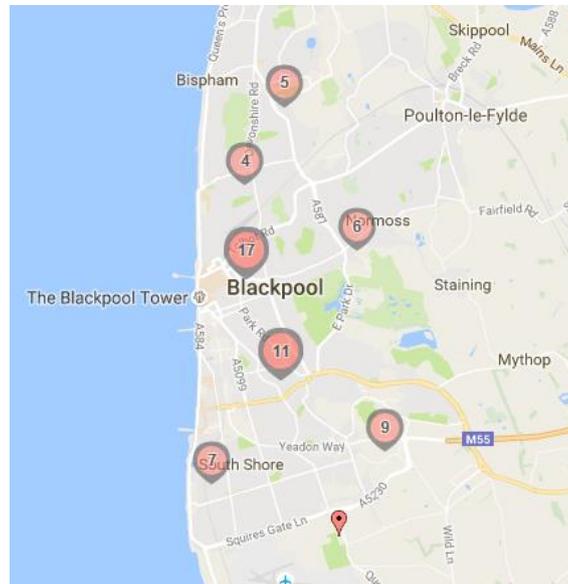
2.3 Who responded?

Figure 2.1: Respondent demographic information

Question options	Number of responses
Does your household receive Council Tax Support?	
Yes	23
No	44
Don't know	2
Are you...?	
Male	32
Female	37
Prefer not to say	1
Which age group do you belong to?	
18 to 24	4
25 to 34	8
35 to 44	12
45 to 54	25
55 to 64	11
65 to 74	9
75 or over	0
Prefer not to say	1
Do you have any children in the following age groups? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)	
Under 5	11
5 to 10	10
11 to 16	8
Over 16	25
Don't have any children	20
Prefer not to say	4
Do you consider yourself to have a disability?	
Yes	17
No	52
Prefer not to say	0
What best describes your ethnic background?	
White	69
BME/ prefer not to say	0
Which of these best describes your current situation? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)	
Full/ part time work or self-employed	40
Unable to work due to illness/ disability	12
Retired	12
Other	10
Prefer not to say	1

The map below illustrates the spread of responses received across the borough.

Figure 2.2: Map of valid postcodes received from respondents (base – 60)



Map accessed from BatchGeo on 19 October 2016

3 Main Findings

3.1 Views on Specific Proposals

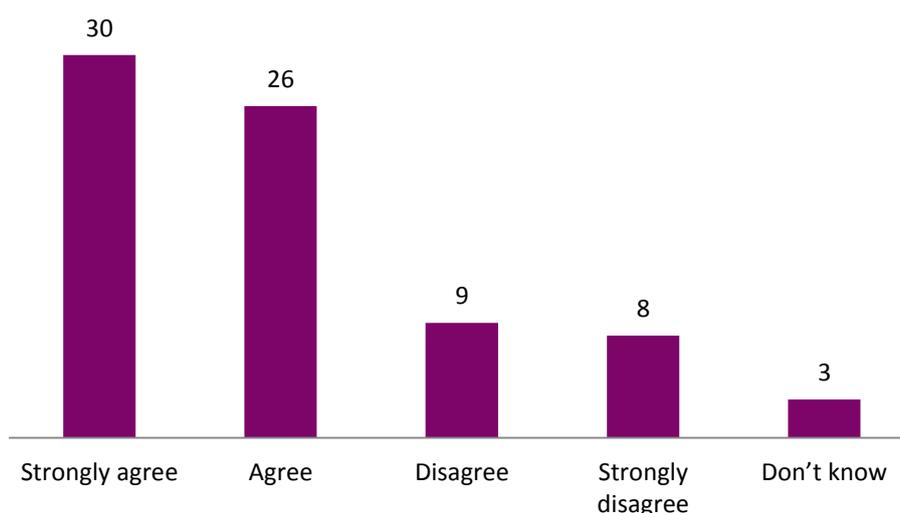
The consultation included six proposals relating to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. For each proposal people were asked to what extent they agree or disagree and were also given the opportunity to explain their response.

56 of 76 people strongly agree or agree with the proposal to reduce the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Council Tax Reduction to four weeks.

45 comments were made on this proposal. The main comments in support of the proposal centred around the premise that people should not be claiming reductions and benefits if they are able to leave the country for such a period of time and they should not be receiving reductions if they are not in the country.

The main reason for people disagreeing is that they feel the proposal should consider extenuating circumstances when there might be a legitimate reason for someone being away from Great Britain for longer than four weeks, such as falling ill whilst abroad.

Figure 3.1: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Council Tax Reduction to four weeks (base – 76)

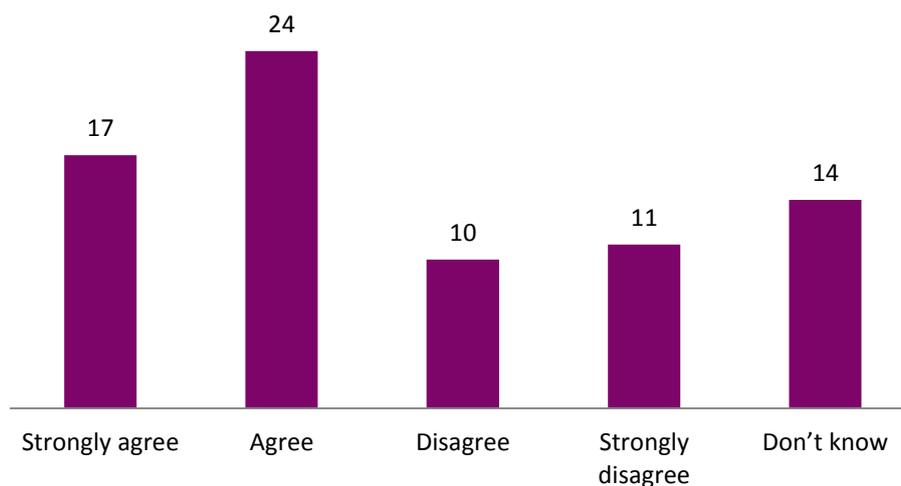


41 of 76 people strongly agree or agree with the proposal to reduce the element of a Work Related Activity Component in calculations for new ESA applicants. 21 people disagree or strongly disagree and 14 did not know whether they agree or not.

Of the comments made, the main reason for agreeing was that those people felt it was “fair” and “logical” to bring it in line, although some did agree with the caveat that those people it affects should not “see a difference” and “should be given as much help as possible”.

Of those who disagree with the proposal, reasons given included a perception that it would be “an added hardship” for those people who “get little enough money as it is”. Moreover, several comments suggested this would be unfair on people who are sick and vulnerable.

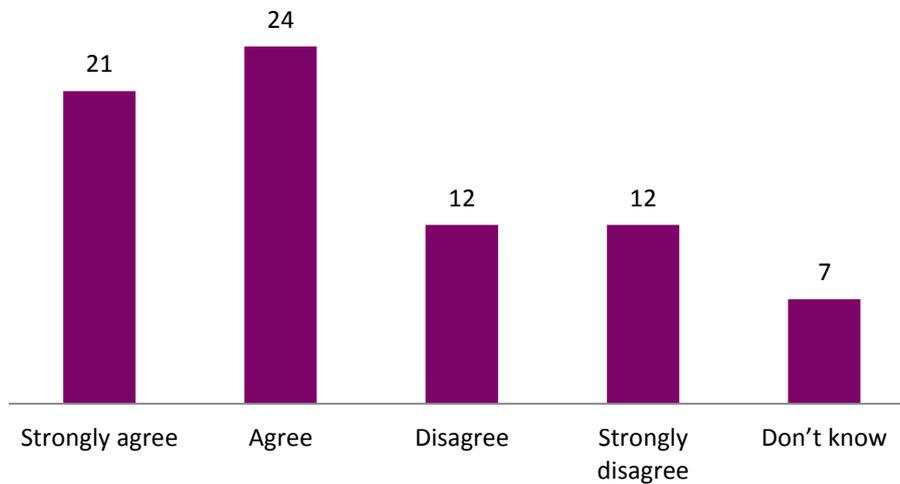
Figure 3.2: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce the element of a Work Related Activity Component in the calculation of the current scheme for new ESA applicants (base – 76)



45 of 76 people strongly agree or agree with the proposal to limit the number of dependent children within the calculation for Council Tax Reduction to a maximum of two. 24 people disagree or strongly disagree with this proposal and 7 do not know.

Of the comments received, those who agree tend to feel that children “should not be seen as a source of income” and that it should be the family’s responsibility to financially support additional children in a household. However, disagreement tended to relate to a view that the proposal would effectively penalise larger families and could have an impact on larger families and the children themselves.

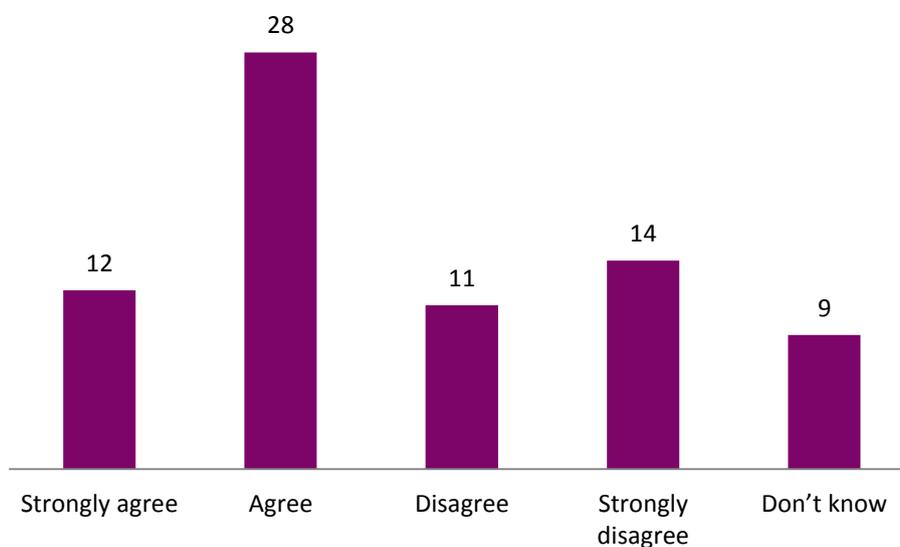
Figure 3.3: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the proposal to limit the number of dependent children within the calculation for Council Tax Reduction to a maximum of two (base – 76)



40 of 74 people strongly agree or agree with the proposal to remove entitlement to the Severe Disability Premium where another person is paid the Carers Element of Universal Credit. 25 people disagree or strongly disagree with the proposal and 9 do not know.

Of the comments received, people generally agreed because they see the proposal as fair, consistent and simplified. However, those who disagree feel it could leave some of the most vulnerable residents worse off.

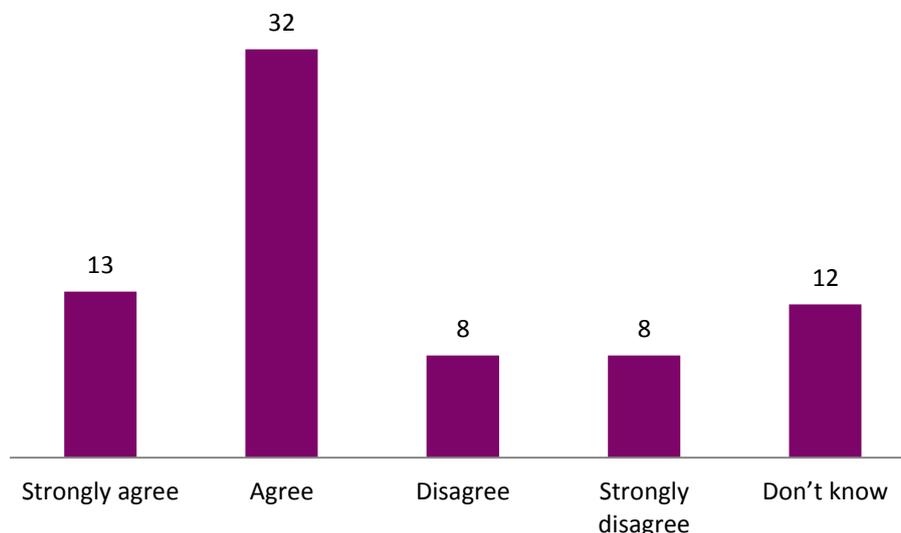
Figure 3.4: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the proposal to remove entitlement to the Severe Disability Premium where another person is paid Universal Credit (Carers Element) to look after them (base – 74)



45 of 73 people strongly agree or agree with the overall approach to align Council Tax Reduction with Housing Benefit. 16 people disagree or strongly disagree and 12 do not know.

Of the comments received, people generally agree with the approach because it is seen to make sense and will ensure the council can run an efficient scheme which is fair and consistent. Some of the people who agree with the approach did note some concern though that any changes might impact on residents who are vulnerable or struggling. Of those who disagree with the approach, some are in disagreement with the central government changes that the proposals align to and again feel that some specific proposals would adversely impact on residents.

Figure 3.5: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the overall approach to align Council Tax Reduction with Housing Benefit (base – 73)

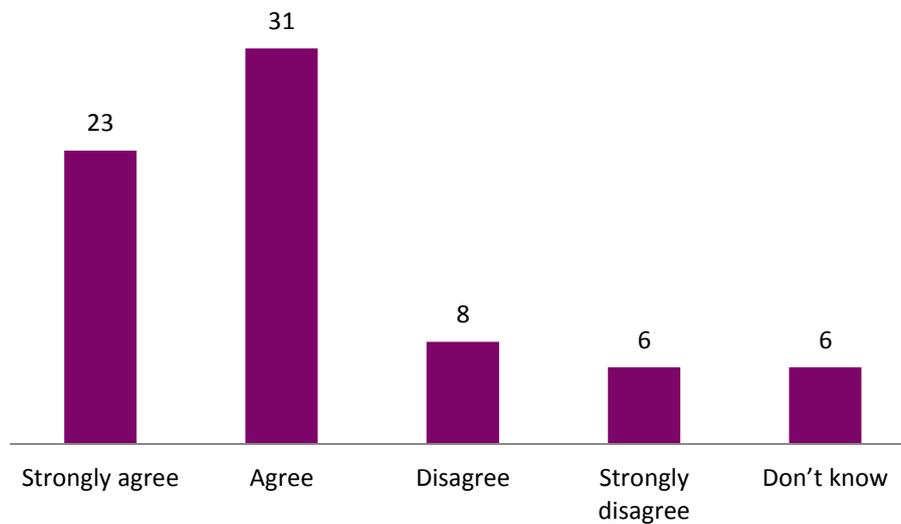


The final proposal, not related to alignment with central government changes to Housing Benefit, received strong support from respondents. 54 of 74 people strongly agree or agree with the proposal to give additional support to vulnerable groups in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. 14 people disagree or strongly disagree and 6 do not know.

Of the comments received, people who agree with the proposal do so because they feel it is a good thing to support those who are most vulnerable. Those who disagree generally feel that that the additional cost to support vulnerable people would ultimately come at the expense of working people.

The consultation also asked if there are any particular vulnerable groups the proposal should focus on. Suggestions included people with disabilities, homeless people and low income working people.

Figure 3.6: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the proposal to give additional support to vulnerable groups in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (base – 74)

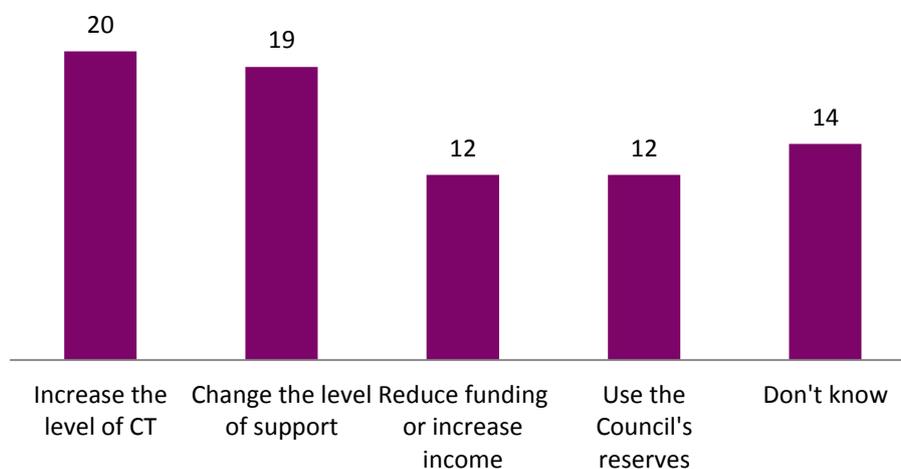


3.2 Other Suggestions and Comments

If the council does not align the Council Tax Reduction Scheme with Housing Benefit or provides additional support to vulnerable groups, 20 of the 78 people who responded indicated that the council should increase the level of Council Tax. Additionally, 19 people think the council should look at changing the overall level of support.

A range of alternative suggestions for making savings were also put forward by respondents including selling land and properties which are no longer profitable and reviewing staff salaries and expenses.

Figure 3.7: How any additional costs could be found if the Council Tax Reduction Scheme is not aligned to Housing Benefit (base – 78)



Finally, the consultation asked people what impact, if any, the proposed changes might have on them. More than half of the comments suggested that the proposals would not have any impact on them, including those of pensionable age who are protected. The main impact highlighted was that some people will be poorer as a result of the proposals.