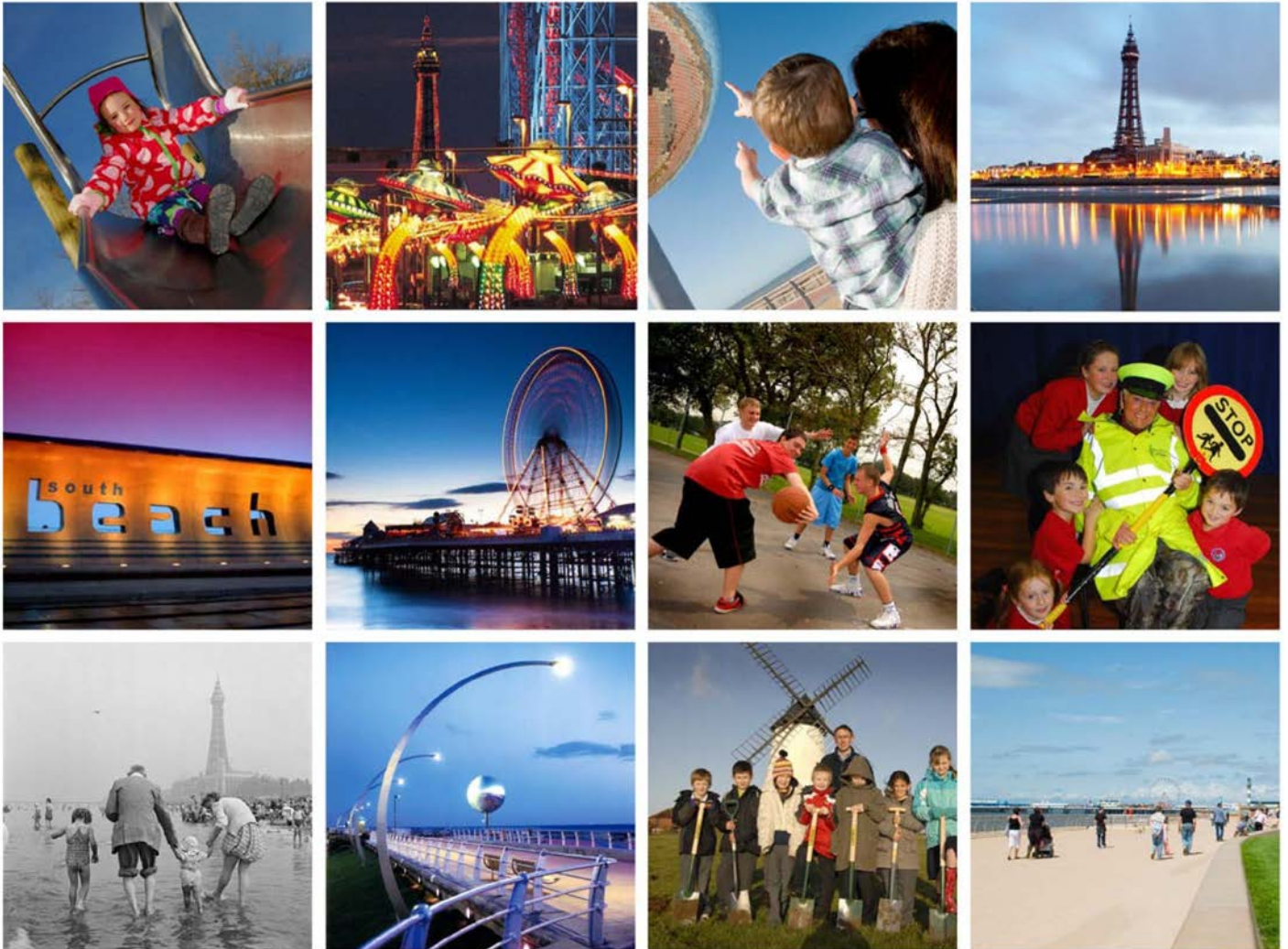


Council Tax and Business Rates Discretionary Discount Policy

BlackpoolCouncil



Council Tax and Business Rates Discretionary Discount Policy

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Name	Title	Signature	Date
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Council Tax and Business Rates Discretionary Discount Policy

1. Introduction

Section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended) and sections 47, 48 and 49 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (as amended) empowers a billing authority to reduce the amount of tax payable.

Blackpool has adopted a local Council Tax Reduction Scheme from 1st April 2013, which replaced Council Tax Benefit. However it is likely that other circumstances will arise where the Council could consider a further discretionary reduction in exceptional circumstances. In addition local Businesses who are experiencing severe financial difficulties may request assistance in meeting the burden of local taxation.

Funding for such reductions must be provided by the Council. This policy sets out how the Council will use these powers and the criteria that must be satisfied.

The Council is committed to ensuring that the local taxpayers are aware of the policy and are able to quickly and easily apply for assistance.

Aims of the Discretionary Discount Policy

- Provide a mechanism for the Council to assist members of the community who are unable to meet the financial burden of local taxation
- Helping residents in receipt of Council Tax Support who are unable to increase their income
- Alleviating poverty
- Helping those who are trying to help themselves
- Supporting people who are starting work
- Supporting the most vulnerable in the local community
- Helping customers through difficult personal events
- Assisting customers in accordance with the Council's Child Poverty Strategy

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2. Policy Objectives and Action Plan

Objective 1: To ensure that assistance is available and accessible to members of the community most in need

- Issue regular bulletins to staff reminding them of the policy and qualifying criteria
- Regular refresher training for assessment staff to promote proactive identification of potential cases
- Provide effective overview training to non-benefits staff on the policy and qualifying criteria to promote take-up and awareness in appropriate circumstances.
- Promote access to the scheme through:
 - Leaflets and posters in areas accessed by customers.
 - Continued development of the Blackpool Council website to ensure that up to date information is provided and that relevant forms and information can be downloaded.
- Ensure third sector advice agencies are aware of the policy and qualifying criteria.
- Promoting awareness to Members
- Identifying target client groups who will be unlikely to be able increase their income. This may include :
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (Support Component) and Long Term Incapacity Benefit
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients, in receipt of Carer's Premium, who are full time carers
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients with disabled children
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients with children under 5
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients who are starting employment
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients who do not have English as a first language
 - Council Tax Reduction recipients with learning difficulties
- Identify target groups from records held by other Council Services:
 - Social and Private Sector Housing Tenants with significant arrears who may qualify for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP).
 - Council Tax payers who have been issued with a summons.
 - Customers who are eligible for but have not claimed a disabled parking badge.

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- People requiring assistance from the Emergency Planning response team.
- Providing a facility to visit customers to assist them in making an application and provide supporting documents.
- Working closely with existing and new service partners and stakeholders to promote awareness of the policy.

Objective 2: To ensure discretionary discounts are only awarded when no other means of assistance is available.

- Ensure assessments of applications for local Council Tax Reduction incorporate a benefits maximization check.
- Ensure the applicant does not have income or capital which should be used to meet the liability.
- Signpost customers who do not meet the criteria to appropriate alternative advice services
- Conduct a regular review of the policy and outcomes of applications in order to review qualifying criteria and improve targeting procedures and processes.
- Provide guidance for Decision Makers which is regularly reviewed and updated.
- Implement a quality monitoring regime to ensure decisions are independent, fair and consistent.
- Ensure publicity is available to encourage customers to claim other benefits they are entitled to and where to access debt advice and money management tools.
- Ensure other sums owed to the Council (e.g. sundry debts, Housing Benefit overpayments) are reviewed and reduced repayments agreed where appropriate
- Ensure a Discretionary Housing Payment for Housing Benefit is awarded if appropriate
- Ensure recovery action is delayed where appropriate
- Awards will be tailored to match need. The period and amount of an award will be determined based upon the circumstances in each case.
- Awards will only be made for a period relating to the financial year in which the application is made.
- Awards may be reviewed at any time and may be revised, reduced or withdrawn if it is found that the circumstances of the applicant have changed and the award is no longer appropriate.

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Objective 3: To monitor and evaluate the administration of the policy to ensure that the service reflects the needs of the community

- Monitoring of fund spending:
 - Monthly reporting of expenditure to be provided to Divisional Management Team meetings.
 - Quarterly reporting to the Director of Resources.
 - Analysis of applications received and outcomes in order to review policy, methodology and improve targeting.
- Conduct a regular review of income and expenditure forms used.
- Conduct a regular review of the policy, criteria and guidance for decision makers.
- Review the outcome of requests for reconsideration to improve guidance and methodology.
- Conduct an annual review and analysis of applications received to identify and learn from:
 - Reasons for the award
 - Reasons for the refusal of an award
 - Origin of the application
- Invite and action feedback on processes and procedures from partners and stakeholders.

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3. Discretionary Discount - Customers in receipt of local Council Tax Reduction

Blackpool Council adopted a local Council Tax Reduction Scheme effective from 1st April 2013. During the development of the scheme the Councils' Equality Analysis identified that certain groups affected by the reduction in support would be unlikely to be able to increase their income. The Discretionary Discount Policy will prioritise these customers.

For an award of this type of discretionary discount to be made, the applicant must be:

- In receipt of Council Tax Reduction; and
- Have a shortfall between the level of Council Tax Reduction and their council tax liability; and
- In the opinion of the Council, be in need of further assistance with Council Tax in accordance with the qualifying criteria.

Requests for further reductions in Council Tax liability will be required in writing from the customer, their advocate / appointee or a recognised third party acting on their behalf.

Each case will be considered on 'its merits' however all of the following criteria should be met:

- There must be evidence of hardship or personal circumstance that justifies a further reduction in Council Tax liability.
- The Council must be satisfied that the customer has taken reasonable steps to resolve their situation prior to application.
- The customer does not have access to other assets that could be realised and used to pay the Council Tax.
- All other eligible discounts/reliefs have been awarded to the customer.

Responsible officer

The responsibility for making discretionary decisions will rest with the Director of Resources.

Decision making process

Stage 1: The initial request will be dealt with by a Decision Maker (Senior Benefits Assistant, Senior Benefit Specialist or Team Manager) who will consider the application against the criteria set out in this policy, based upon the information provided by the applicant and known to the Council.

Stage 2: A Senior Benefits Manager will authorise the decision.

Notification of decision

The Council will notify the applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving sufficient information to make a decision.

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Review of decision/re-determination requests

The Council will accept an applicant's written request for a redetermination of its decision.

Stage 1: The original decision and any additional information provided will be reviewed by a different Decision Maker who will recommend either to confirm or amend the original decision.

Stage 2: The Assistant Treasurer will consider the application for review and the recommendation and determine whether to award a discretionary discount.

Notification of review/re-determination decision

The Council will notify an applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving a request for a re-determination.

A discretionary reduction made under section 13A(1)(a) or (c) of the Local Government Finance Act (LGFA) 1992 can be the subject of an appeal to the Valuation Tribunal under section 16 of the LGFA 1992.

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4. Discretionary Discounts – Customers not in receipt of local Council Tax Reduction

Requests for reductions in Council Tax liability will be required in writing from the customer, their advocate / appointee or a recognised third party acting on their behalf

Each case will be considered on 'its merits' however all of the following criteria should be met:

- There must be evidence of hardship or personal circumstance that justifies a reduction in Council Tax Liability.
- The Council must be satisfied that the customer has taken reasonable steps to resolve their situation prior to application.
- The customer does not have access to other assets that could be realised and used to pay the Council Tax.
- The customer is not entitled to an award under the local Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- All other eligible discounts/reliefs have been awarded to the customer.

Responsible officer

The responsibility for making discretionary decisions will rest with the Director of Resources.

The Decision Maker (Revenues Team Manager) will liaise with the applicant in each case to request sufficient information in order that a decision can be made.

Decision making process

Stage 1: The initial request will be dealt with by a Decision Maker (Revenues Team Manager) who will consider the application against the criteria set out in this policy, based upon the information provided by the applicant and known to the Council.

Stage 2: A Senior Revenues Manager will authorise the decision.

Notification of decision

The Council will notify the applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving sufficient information to make a decision.

Review of decision/re-determination requests

The Council will accept an applicant's written request for a redetermination of its decision.

Stage 1: The original decision and any additional information provided will be reviewed by a different Decision Maker who will recommend either to confirm or amend the original decision.

Stage 2: The Assistant Treasurer will consider the application for review and the recommendation and determine whether to award a discretionary discount.

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Notification of review/re-determination decision

The Council will notify an applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving a request for a re-determination.

A discretionary reduction made under section 13A(1)(a) or (c) of the Local Government Finance Act (LGFA) 1992 can be the subject of an appeal to the Valuation Tribunal under section 16 of the LGFA 1992.

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5. Discretionary Discounts - Business Rates

Requests for reductions in Business Rates will be required in writing from the ratepayer or a recognised third party acting on their behalf

Each case will be considered on its merits however all of the following criteria should be met:

- It must be in the interest of the Council and community for the local authority to grant a reduction.
- All other eligible discounts/reliefs have been awarded to the ratepayer.

Responsible officer

The responsibility for making discretionary decisions will rest with the Director of Resources.

A Revenues Team Manager will liaise with the applicant in each case to request sufficient information in order that a decision can be made.

Decision making process

Stage 1: The Decision Maker (Principal Income and Recovery Manager or Revenues and Benefits Service Manager) will make a recommendation to the Director of Resources, considering the application against the criteria set out in this policy, based upon the information provided by the applicant and known to the Council.

Stage 2: The Director of Resources will consider the application and the recommendation to determine whether to award a discretionary discount.

Notification of decision

The Council will notify the applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving sufficient information to make a decision.

Review of decision/re-determination requests

The Council will accept an applicant's written request for a redetermination of its decision if there is new information available on which to reconsider the original decision.

Notification of review/re-determination decision

The Council will notify an applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving a request for a re-determination.

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6. Business Rates Retail Relief

Eligible retail properties description

Relief of up to £1,000 may be provided to occupied retail properties, with a rateable value of £50,000 or less, in each of the financial years 2014/15 and 2015/16 subject to local discretion.

To qualify for the relief the retail property should be wholly or mainly being used as a shop, restaurant, cafe or drinking establishment. In a similar way to other reliefs (such as charity relief), this is a test on use rather than occupation. Therefore, retail properties which are occupied but not wholly or mainly used for the qualifying purpose will not qualify for the relief.

The Council will consider each award based on individual merits and will refuse the award where it is considered that the business/retail property is not supporting the Council's wider objectives or it is determined to be having a detrimental impact on neighbourhoods or communities.

Relief will only be allowed where the award complies with European Union State Aid law.

The Council reserves the right to withdraw any award where it becomes evident that the property is not being used for a qualifying purpose.

For the purposes of this relief the Council considers shops, restaurants, cafes and drinking establishments to mean:

Retail properties that are being used for the sale of goods to visiting members of the public:

Shops (such as: florist, bakers, butchers, grocers, greengrocers, jewellers, stationers, off licence, chemists, newsagents, hardware stores, supermarkets, etc.)

Charity shops

Opticians

Post offices

Furnishing shops/ display rooms (such as: carpet shops, double glazing)

Car/ caravan show rooms

Second hand car lots

Markets

Petrol stations

Garden centres

Art galleries (where art is for sale/hire)

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Retail properties that are being used for the provision of the following services to visiting members of the public:

Hair and beauty services (such as: hair dressers, nail bars, beauty salons, tanning shops, etc.)

Shoe repairs/ key cutting

Travel agents

Ticket offices e.g. for theatre

Dry cleaners

Launderettes

PC/ TV/ domestic appliance repair

Funeral directors

Photo processing

DVD/ video rentals

Tool hire

Car hire

Retail properties that are being used for the sale of food and/ or drink to visiting members of the public:

Restaurants

Takeaways

Sandwich shops

Coffee shops

Pubs

Bars

Ineligible retail properties descriptions

The list below sets out the types of uses that the Council does not consider to be retail use for the purpose of this relief.

(A) Retail properties that are being used for the provision of the following services to visiting members of the public:

Financial services (e.g. banks, building societies, cash points, bureau de change, payday lenders, betting shops, pawn brokers)

Other services (e.g. estate agents, letting agents, employment agencies)

Medical services (e.g. vets, dentists, doctors, osteopaths, chiropractors)

Professional services (e.g. solicitors, accountants, insurance agents/ financial advisers, tutors)

Post office sorting office

(B) Retail properties that are not reasonably accessible to visiting members of the public

(C) Retail properties that do not support the Council's wider objectives or could have a detrimental impact on neighbourhoods and communities

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Responsible officer

The responsibility for making discretionary relief decisions will rest with the Director of Resources, who will discharge this responsibility by the following process:

Decision making process

Stage 1: The initial request will be dealt with by a Team Manager who will consider the application against the criteria set out in this policy, based upon the information provided by the applicant and known to the Council.

Stage 2: The Revenues and Benefits Service Manager/Principal Income and Recovery Manager will authorise the decision.

Notification of decision

The Council will notify the applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving sufficient information to make a decision.

Review of decision/re-determination requests

The Council will accept an applicant's written request for a redetermination of its decision. The process will be as follows:

Stage 1: The original decision and any additional information provided will be reviewed by a different Manager who will recommend either to confirm or amend the original decision.

Stage 2: The Assistant Treasurer Revenues, Benefits and Customer First will consider the application for review and the recommendation and determine whether to award discretionary retail relief.

Notification of review/re-determination decision

The Council will notify an applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving a request for a re-determination. Following the re-determination of a request for a discretionary award there is no further right of appeal.

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7. Business Rates New Build Empty Property Relief

All newly built commercial property completed between 1 October 2013 and 30 September 2016 are exempt from empty property rates for the first 18 months, up to the state aids limits. Guidance from DCLG will be considered in relation to properties that have been subject to splits, mergers or other changes.

Responsible officer

The responsibility for making discretionary relief decisions will rest with the Director of Resources, who will discharge this responsibility by the following process:

Decision making process

Stage 1: The initial request will be dealt with by a Team Manager who will consider the application against the criteria set out in this policy, based upon the information provided by the applicant and known to the Council.

Stage 2: The Revenues and Benefits Service Manager/Principal Income and Recovery Manager will authorise the decision.

Notification of decision

The Council will notify the applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving sufficient information to make a decision.

Review of decision/re-determination requests

The Council will accept an applicant's written request for a redetermination of its decision. The process will be as follows:

Stage 1: The original decision and any additional information provided will be reviewed by a different Manager who will recommend either to confirm or amend the original decision.

Stage 2: The Assistant Treasurer Revenues, Benefits and Customer First will consider the application for review and the recommendation and determine whether to award new build occupation relief.

Notification of review/re-determination decision

The Council will notify an applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving a request for a re-determination. Following the re-determination of a request for a discretionary award there is no further right of appeal.

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8. Temporary Reoccupation Relief

New occupants of previously empty retail premises will receive 50% discount from business rates. The discount will last for 18 months. The relief will be available to businesses moving in to properties between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2016.

There are no restrictions based on the type, or the size, of the business which takes the property on – i.e. it is not required to be a retail business. Guidance from DCLG will be considered in relation to properties that have been subject to splits, mergers or other changes.

Responsible officer

The responsibility for making discretionary relief decisions will rest with the Director of Resources, who will discharge this responsibility by the following process:

Decision making process

Stage 1: The initial request will be dealt with by a Team Manager who will consider the application against the criteria set out in this policy, based upon the information provided by the applicant and known to the Council.

Stage 2: The Revenues and Benefits Service Manager/Principal Income and Recovery Manager will authorise the decision.

Notification of decision

The Council will notify the applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving sufficient information to make a decision.

Review of decision/re-determination requests

The Council will accept an applicant's written request for a redetermination of its decision. The process will be as follows:

Stage 1: The original decision and any additional information provided will be reviewed by a different Manager who will recommend either to confirm or amend the original decision.

Stage 2: The Assistant Treasurer Revenues, Benefits and Customer First will consider the application for review and the recommendation and determine whether to award temporary reoccupation relief.

Notification of review/re-determination decision

The Council will notify an applicant of its decision within 28 days of receiving a request for a re-determination. Following the re-determination of a request for a discretionary award there is no further right of appeal.