

Council Tax Support Scheme Consultation 2016



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1 Executive Summary

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

69% of respondents agree with the overall approach to align Council Tax Support with changes to Housing Benefit.

More respondents agreed than disagreed with all proposed changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme. The highest level of agreement was for reducing the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Support to four weeks, whilst the lowest level of agreement, relatively, was for the proposal to reduce the element of a Work Related Activity Component in the calculation of the current scheme for new ESA applicants.

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 on low incomes, families and people with disabilities or illnesses.

Figure 1.1: Summary of agreement levels for each proposal (base – 97)

	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 Support to four weeks	83%	14%	3%
To limit the number of dependent children within the calculation for Council Tax Support to a maximum of two	71%	22%	7%
To reduce backdating to one month	61%	34%	4%
To remove the Family Premium for all new working age applicants	58%	29%	13%
To remove entitlement to the Severe Disability Premium where another person is paid Universal Credit (Carers Element) to look after them	56%	28%	14%
To reduce the element of a Work Related Activity Component in the calculation of the current scheme for new ESA applicants	53%	22%	25%

Where % totals are above or below 100%, this is due to rounding

2 Background and Methodology

2.1 Background

The Council's local Council Tax Support Scheme replaced Council Tax Benefit from April 2013. The Council's scheme, based on the previous Housing / Council Tax Benefit Scheme, was approved by Council in December 2012 after consultation was undertaken with residents of Pendle, Lancashire County Council, Parish Councils, Police, Fire Authority and other interested parties.

The old Council Tax Benefit scheme was retained within the local support scheme and it has continued to protect pensioners, as prescribed by Central Government. Pendle Borough Council's Council Tax Support Scheme has remained unchanged since April 2013, except for the annual uprating of applicable amounts/premiums keeping it in line with the Housing Benefit Scheme and is formally ratified annually by Full Council.

Central Government announced a number of welfare changes in its 2015 Summer Budget, some of these changes apply to the Housing Benefit Scheme. Pendle Borough Council is proposing that its Council Tax Support Scheme continues to align with the Housing Benefit Scheme and that the % reduction of support does not increase, but remains at 20%. This will aid an efficient/streamlined scheme and will mean that the Council would not have to consider reducing the maximum level of support 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 Pendle 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 invites to the Citizens' Panel, a notification to a database of residents registered for updates through the Council's website, social media posts 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 with reception staff encouraging completions. The consultation went live on 5 September and closed on 31 October 2016.

A total of **97 responses** were received to the consultation survey.

2.3 Who responded?

Figure 2.1: Respondent demographic information

Question options	Number of responses	% breakdowns
Does your household receive Council Tax Support?		
Yes	15	16%
No	75	81%
Don't know	3	3%
Are you...?		
Male	39	55%
Female	51	42%
Prefer not to say	3	3%
Which age group do you belong to?		
18 to 24	3	3%
25 to 34	6	6%
35 to 44	21	22%
45 to 54	15	16%
55 to 64	27	29%
65 to 74	13	14%
75 or over	3	3%
Prefer not to say	6	6%
Do you have any children in the following age groups? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)		
Under 5	9	9%
5 to 10	7	7%
11 to 16	14	14%
Over 16	36	35%
Don't have any children	26	25%
Prefer not to say	11	11%
Do you consider yourself to have a disability?		
Yes	19	20%
No	72	76%
Prefer not to say	4	4%
What best describes your ethnic background?		
White	76	80%
BME	10	10%
Prefer not to say	10	10%
Which of these best describes your current situation? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)		
Full/ part time work or self-employed	62	60%
Retired	17	17%
Other	18	17%
Prefer not to say	6	6%

The map below illustrates the spread of responses received across the borough. Please note that three responses were received with postcodes outside of Pendle.

Figure 2.2: Map of valid postcodes received from respondents (base – 89)



Map accessed from BatchGeo on 4 November 2016

3 Main Findings

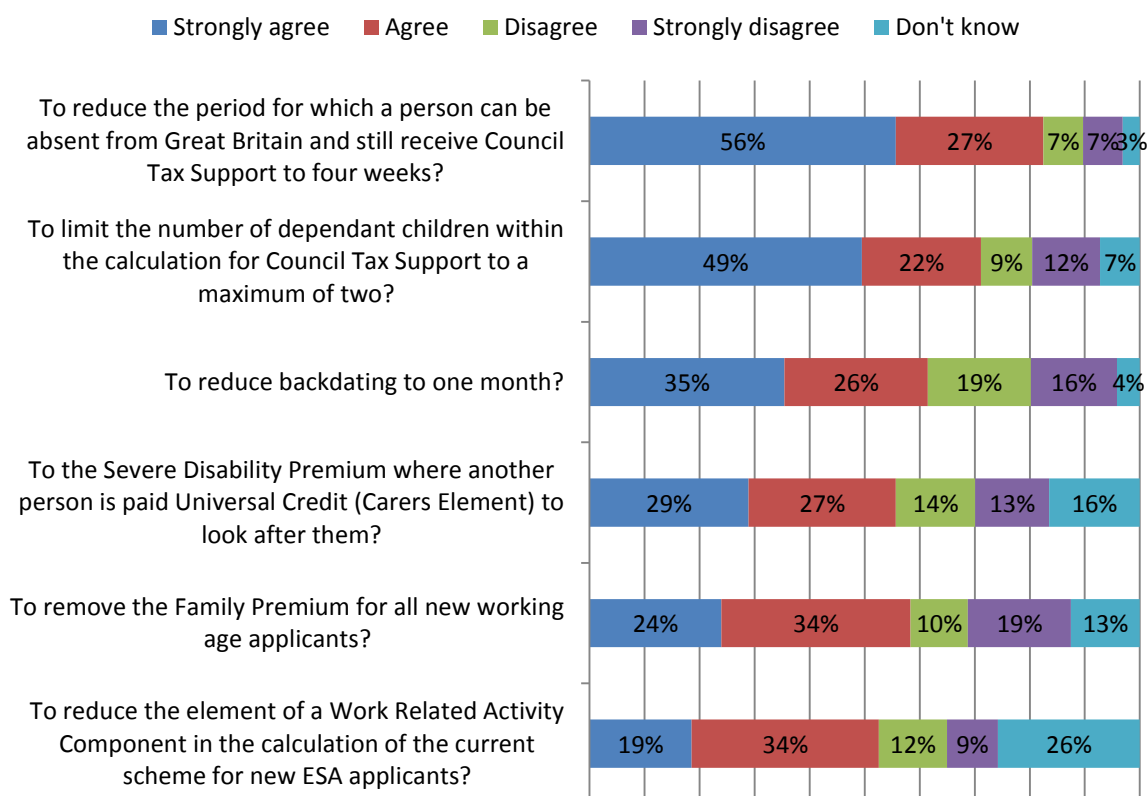
3.1 Views on Specific Proposals

The consultation included six proposals relating to the Council Tax Support Scheme.

The highest level of agreement was with the proposal to reduce the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain. 56% strongly agree with the proposal and a further 27% agree with it.

The highest level of disagreement is for reducing backdating to one month. 35% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree, although still more respondents (53%) strongly agree or agree with the proposal.

Figure 3.1: To what extent respondents agree or disagree with the proposals? (base – 97)



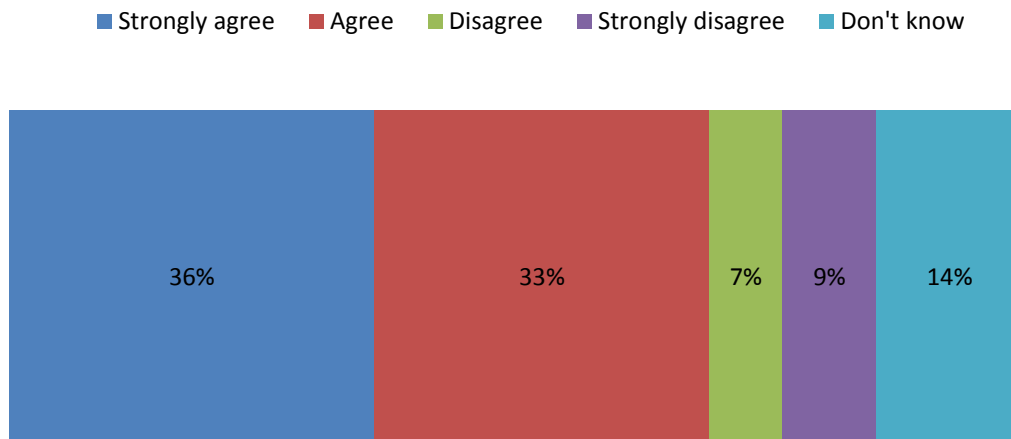
For each proposal people were given the opportunity to comment and explain why they agree or disagree. The table below highlights the main reasons for agreeing and disagreeing with the different proposals. It should be noted that a number of respondents commented that they do not understand some of the proposals and what they mean due to the technical nature of the consultation topic.

Figure 3.2: Main reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the proposals

	Main reasons for agreeing	Main reasons for disagreeing
To remove the Family Premium for all new working age applicants	Seen as fairer and equal for all residents and support for aligning the Scheme with Government changes – “it’s a fairer system”	Income for some families is already low and this would have a particular impact on children – “the proposals will create more hardship”
To reduce backdating to one month	For those who agree, one month is seen as “adequate” or “sufficient” time to make a claim, “seeing no reason why people can’t claim on time”	Any change should consider “extenuating circumstances” and complex reasons for backdating, with some feeling like one month might not always be long enough
To reduce the period for which a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive Council Tax Support to four weeks	Four weeks is seen as sufficient time to allow for breaks away from the country, with some feeling people should not be on benefits if they are away from the area	Few comments made in disagreement, with one suggesting if they still have “possession/ ownership of the property then [they] deserve that relaxation”
To reduce the element of a Work Related Activity Component in the calculation of the current scheme for new ESA applicants	General support as it seems to be “appropriate” and “a fair way” to make savings	Some comments about how people on ESA could suffer and it could make life harder for people already struggling with injury and illness
To limit the number of dependent children within the calculation for Council Tax Support to a maximum of two	Support for the proposal is generally based on the belief that growing families is a choice and the financial implications should be carefully considered, with those in agreement feeling two children is a reasonable cap	Any disagreement tended to be around the impact the proposal could have on families who already have more than two children, with several comments suggesting it is not right to discriminate based on the size of a family
To remove entitlement to the Severe Disability Premium where another person is paid Universal Credit (Carers Element) to look after them	Support for any proposal that eliminates duplication of payments (“it sounds like they get the payment twice over”) and it ensures a more efficient system	Very few comments explaining any disagreement with the proposal, one expressed concern that “disabled people have a hard enough time without adding more stress”

Overall, 69% of respondents strongly agree or agree with the approach to align the Council Tax Support Scheme with the proposed changes to the Housing Benefit Scheme.

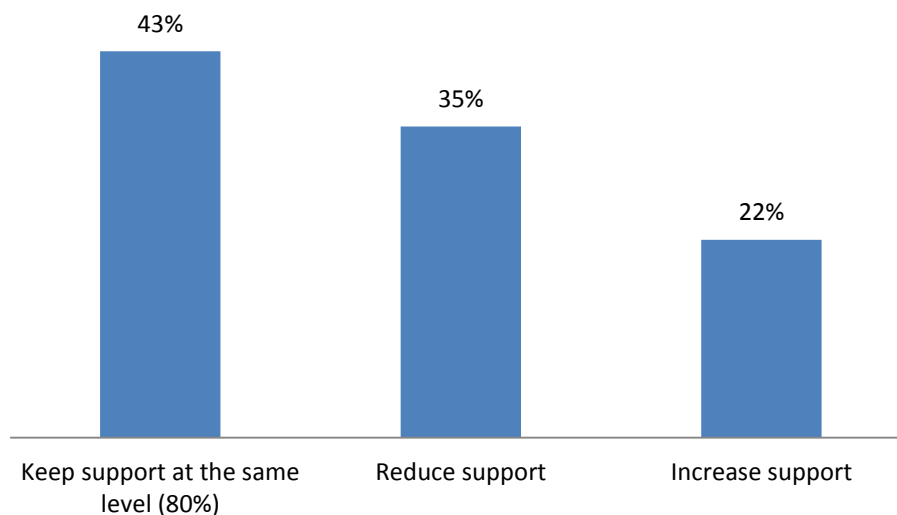
Figure 3.3: Overall, to what extent respondents agree or disagree with the approach to align the Council Tax Support Scheme with the Government's proposed changes to the Housing Benefit Scheme (base – 97)



3.2 Other Comments and Suggestions

When asked what the Council should do with the level of Support, 43% feel it should be kept at the same level, 35% indicated that the level should be reduced and 22% feel it should be increased.

Figure 3.4: What should the Council do with the level of Council Tax Support? (base – 95)

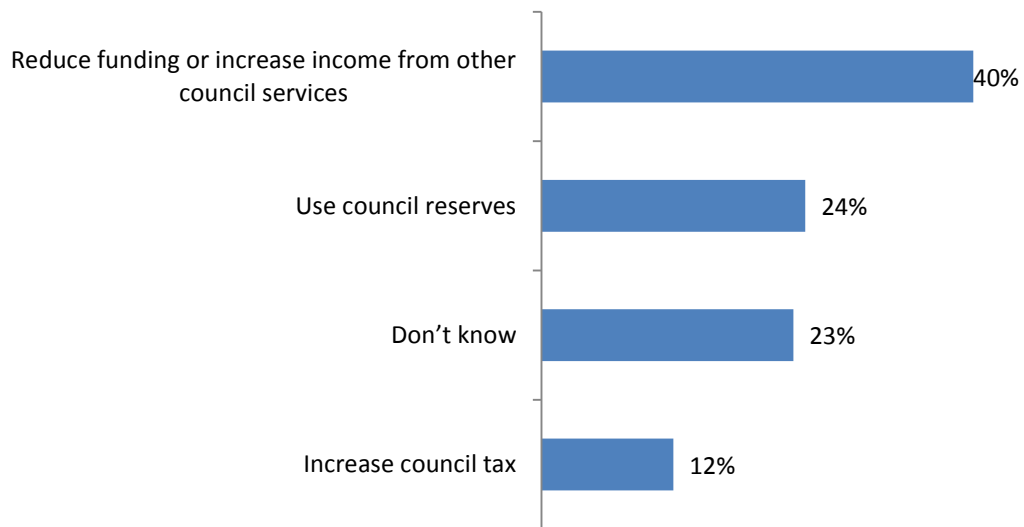


The next question in the consultation asked people what impact, if any, the proposed changes might have on them. The main comments made were:

- The majority of comments suggested that the proposals would not have any impact on them, including those of pensionable age who are protected
- Of those who highlighted some impact the proposals might have, this included a scenario where they may have to make a new claim in the future
- Some people who indicated the proposals would not have any impact on them did suggest that there would be an impact if further savings had to be found from other services or an increase in Council Tax

When asked how the Council should find any additional costs if the Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit schemes are not aligned, 40% would look to reduce funding or increase income in other Council services, whilst 24 % feel any additional costs should be found by using the Council’s reserves. 12% feel the level of Council Tax should be increased to cover any additional costs. 23% did not know how to respond.

Figure 3.5: How additional costs should be found if Council Tax Support is not aligned with Housing Benefit (base – 90)



Finally, the consultation asked if respondents had any other suggestions for how the Council could make savings or increase income. A range of comments were received, including:

- Specific comments about changes to a range of council services, such as reducing the frequency of bin collections, streamlining services, pushing fines for litter, utilising online systems and tackling benefit fraud
- Some comments were made about salary and staffing levels at the Council
- A couple of comments suggesting those residents who can afford to should pay more