



**REPORT of
INTERIM CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER**

**to
STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE
25 JANUARY 2024**

COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2024 / 25

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To approve a significantly unchanged Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) scheme and associated policies for 2024 / 25, with minor technical amendments as set out at section 2 (a) to (c) below.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Council:

- (i) That the following changes to the existing schemes are approved:
 - a. a cost of living increase in line with the Department for Work and Pensions schemes be included in the Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) Scheme for 2024 / 25 for Pensioners only;
 - b. that any legislative changes being introduced to the Housing Benefit Scheme, for 2024 / 25 are mirrored in the Council's LCTS Scheme to ensure consistency;
 - c. minor technical amendments to ensure that we are able to administer the Scheme reflecting current local and national guidance and that we may disregard anything determined to be a local welfare payment from our calculation;
- (ii) that these decisions have been made following Members careful reading of and regard to the Equality Impact Assessment at **APPENDIX 1** (pages 35 – 40);
- (iii) that Members note the unchanged framework for the Hardship Provision at **APPENDIX 2** (pages 41 – 46);
- (iv) that the Policy document at **APPENDIX 3** (pages 47 - 54) be approved;
- (v) that the Policy document at **APPENDIX 4** (pages 55 – 196) be approved

3. SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 Following the abolition of the National Council Tax Benefit Scheme in 2013 a replacement Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) scheme was approved by the Council on 13 December 2012 (Minute No. 688 refers). A substantially unchanged scheme was approved for the subsequent years up to and including 2023 / 24.

3.2 The current LCTS scheme reflects the Council's decision to deliver a long-term sustainable Scheme based on cost neutral principles, and it proposed that minimal changes be introduced to the Scheme to ensure that it reflects national legislative changes.

3.3 **Scheme Costs and impact on Council Tax Collection**

3.3.1 The net cost of the LCTS for 2023 / 24 to date is being largely contained within the collection fund. The consequence of further welfare reform and the continuing impact on collection rates of cost of living rises may adversely affect this but based upon current projections the proposed LCTS scheme remains sustainable for 2024 / 25.

3.3.2 Additional support and advice continue to be provided to customers who have difficulty in paying, including independent budgeting and financial advice provided by Maldon Citizens Advice.

3.4 **Hardship Provision**

3.4.1 Subject to the continuation of funding from Essex County Council (ECC), it is proposed that the Council continues to offer this scheme for 2024 / 25.

3.4.2 Members are asked to note the framework for this at **APPENDIX 2**.

3.5 **Discretionary reduction provision**

3.5.1 It is proposed that the Council continues to adopt the largely unchanged policy at **APPENDIX 3** which Members are asked to approve.

4. **CONCLUSION**

4.1 The significantly unchanged scheme supports the delivery of a largely cost neutral LCTS Scheme within the budget proposed for 2024 / 25.

4.2 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken showing no significant issues with the proposed documents.

5. **IMPACT ON PRIORITIES AS SET OUT IN THE CORPORATE PLAN 2023 - 2027**

5.1 **Supporting our communities**

5.1.1 A LCTS scheme helps ensure that the service can be targeted, reducing inequality.

5.2 **Smarter finances**

5.2.1 A LCTS scheme provides a framework for sustainable expenditure and compliance with statutory obligations.

5.3 **Provide good quality services.**

5.3.1 A LCTS scheme provides transparency in the way in which services are delivered, supporting quality and consistency in administration.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- (i) **Impact on Customers** – 3,117 residents are currently entitled to LCTS which is a decrease from 3,332 in the previous year.
- (ii) **Impact on Equalities** – An Equalities Impact Assessment of the LCTS scheme has been undertaken. Members are asked to carefully consider the content of the assessment as part of their decision to approve the proposed LCTS for 2024 / 25.
- (iii) **Impact on Risk** – The proposed scheme is expected to continue to deliver a cost neutral scheme. The cumulative effects of various welfare reforms and Pandemic continue to have an effect both upon Council Tax collection and the number of customers with housing issues. The impacts are being monitored with help and advice being provided by the Council and its partners to support customers.
- (iv) **Impact on Resources (financial)** – The cost of the proposed scheme is largely within budget. The expenditure on the scheme is monitored on a monthly basis, and any significant variations will be reported to Members.
- (v) **Impact on Resources (human)** – The proposed LCTS scheme can be delivered within existing staffing resources.

Background Papers: None.

Enquiries to: Michelle LaMarre, Head of Revenues and Benefits.