

**Council Tax Exceptional
Hardship Scheme
2025/26**

1 Summary

- 1.1 Since April 2013 each billing authority has in place its own Council Tax Reduction (CTR) scheme. Unlike the previous Council Tax Benefit scheme, this local Council Tax Reduction scheme is not fully funded by Central Government and billing authorities are responsible for implementing their own schemes for working age people. The CTR scheme for people of pension age is set by Central Government.
- 1.2 Our CTR scheme also makes provision for a discretionary Exceptional Hardship Scheme. Therefore, both schemes are provided for under the provisions of S13A 1(a) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended by the Local Government Finance Act 2012) and are in addition to the general power to reduce Council Tax liability under S13A 1(c) of the act.
- 1.3 This document sets out the Council's Exceptional Hardship Scheme for assisting people who are experiencing financial difficulty in paying their Council Tax as well as providing support to care leavers, foster carers and special guardians.
- 1.4 The Exceptional Hardship Scheme is targeted to those taxpayers who either apply for Council Tax Reduction but fail to qualify or those taxpayers who receive Council Tax Reduction but who are of the opinion that they require more support.
- 1.5 The Exceptional Hardship Fund is financed through the Council's Collection fund and is available to those households facing exceptional hardship.

2 Objectives of the scheme

- 2.1 The Exceptional Hardship Scheme aims to:
 - support local people experiencing financial hardship who are struggling or unable to pay their Council Tax by providing short term financial assistance.
 - Provide additional support to households occupied by care leavers, foster carers and special guardians

3 Eligibility

- 3.1 To be eligible for a Council Tax Exceptional Hardship payment the taxpayer must be resident at the address for which they have a Council Tax liability in the Somerset Council area.

3.2 Care leavers

- 3.3 The equivalent of a 100% discount for care leavers will be awarded where:
 - they are liable for Council Tax as an occupier in the property for which they are claiming the discount;
 - they are below the age of 25;
 - they are a registered care leaver with Somerset Council or any other relevant local authority within the United Kingdom (and subject to the provision of proof of registration, where required); and
 - irrespective of whether they live alone or not.

3.4 Foster carers and special guardians

3.5 The equivalent of a 50% discount to a foster carer or special guardian will be awarded where they:

- are fully approved as a foster carer by the new Council and meet the care skills standard;
- have provided foster care to a child for a total of 26 weeks (182 days) in the previous 12 months from 1 April to 31 March;
- maintain their approval as a foster carer with the Council
- maintain their availability to foster;
- live within the Somerset area;
- claim all relevant benefits and discounts to which they would usually be entitled;
- claim this discount only on the one dwelling which is their main residence; and
- agree to receiving this council tax discount.

3.6 For care leavers, foster carers and special guardians, section 4 (award criteria) will not apply.

3.7 For all other taxpayers suffering exceptional hardship

3.8 Each application will be considered on its own merits and any payment made will be at the discretion of the Council. Exceptional Hardship is not defined in this policy. However, it is useful to refer to the dictionary definitions of each word.

- 'Exceptional' – unusual, extraordinary, not typical
- 'Hardship' – a condition that is difficult to endure; suffering; deprivation

3.9 Awards for Exceptional Hardship cannot be used:

- for any other reason, other than to reduce Council Tax Liability;
- where an authorised officer from the Council considers the Taxpayer has not taken reasonable steps to reduce unnecessary expenses or the outstanding amount of Council Tax is as a result of wilful refusal or culpable neglect;
- to cover a shortfall caused by a Department for Work and Pensions sanction or suspension which has been applied because the Council Taxpayer has turned down work / interview / training opportunities; and
- to offset any penalties, court costs or enforcement agency costs.

4 Award criteria

4.1 When considering an application for Exceptional Hardship, the Council will take into account:

- whether the applicant receives Council Tax Reduction, the shortfall between the award of CTR and their Council Tax liability;
- the steps taken by the applicant to reduce their Council Tax liability (ensuring all discounts, reliefs and reductions are granted) or affordability (for example changing payment methods and making arrangements to pay their Council Tax over 12 months or setting an alternative payment arrangement to make them more affordable);

- the steps taken by the applicant to establish whether they are entitled to other welfare benefits and if so whether they have claimed them;
- whether the applicant has considered and identified, where possible, the most economical tariffs for utilities (electricity, gas, broadband, telephone, water) and cancelled non-essential contracts;
- whether a Discretionary Housing Payment has been made to help meet their rent liability;
- where the applicant has debt, the steps taken to seek debt and money advice from relevant agencies;
- the personal circumstances, age and medical circumstances of the applicant, their partner and any dependants in the household;
- any non-dependants, boarders or lodgers in the property and the financial contributions they make or could make to the income of the household;
- the income and expenditure of the applicant and their partner, including any income not considered in calculating their CTR;
- how much reasonable household expenditure exceeds income;
- the exceptional nature of the applicant's circumstances and the length of time these circumstances are likely to last;
- whether the situation and reason for the application is out of the taxpayer's control;
- any savings or capital held by the applicant, their partner, or their dependants; and
- any negative impact on the applicant following a change to the CTR scheme made by the Council that has resulted in a significant loss of CTR.

4.2 This list detailed in 4.1 above is not exhaustive and other relevant factors and special circumstances will be considered.

4.3 An award of Exceptional Hardship does not guarantee a further award will be made at a later date, even if the customer's circumstances have not changed. Applicants will be expected to make efforts to either increase their income, reduce expenditure or improve their circumstances.

4.4 An award may be less than the shortfall between the CTR award and the applicant's Council Tax liability.

4.5 Awards will normally only be made in respect of the Council Tax due for the current financial year i.e. not for previous years arrears.

5 Making a claim

5.1 An application for Exceptional Hardship must be made in writing on an application form provided by Somerset Council. Application forms can be completed on the Council's website. If a customer cannot make a claim in writing, the team can support a telephone application. Signposting to Citizens Advice or other support networks will be provided who can offer help in completing an application or offering debt and benefit advice.

5.2 Applicants will need to provide evidence about their circumstances, income and expenditure.

- 5.3 In most cases the person who claims Exceptional Hardship will be the person liable for Council Tax. However, the Council will accept a claim from someone acting on another's behalf, such as an appointee, if it is considered reasonable.
- 5.4 The applicant must tell us of any changes in circumstances that may be relevant to their claim.

6 Decision making process and payments

- 6.1 Both the amount and duration of the award are determined at our discretion and the decision will be made based on the evidence supplied and the circumstances of the claim.
- 6.2 The start of any award and the amount will be determined by the Council. The maximum award will be for a period of up to twelve months and subject to 6.3 below, awards will not span more than a single financial year.
- 6.3 In exceptional cases the Council may consider backdating a claim based on the individual circumstances of the case. In such instances the claim can only be considered for backdating to the previous financial year.
- 6.4 Any award will be made directly to the Council Tax account to reduce the amount of Council Tax payable.
- 6.5 If the Council becomes aware that the information contained in an application was incorrect or information has not been declared, the Council may seek to recover the value of any award. Excess (overpaid) awards will be recovered directly from the taxpayers Council Tax account, increasing the amount of Council Tax due.
- 6.6 The Council will notify the outcome of each application in writing. The notification will include the reason for the decision, the amount and duration of any award and will advise the taxpayer of their appeal rights.
- 6.7 The Council will aim to process and respond to applications for Exceptional Hardship within 1 month. Ordinarily action to recover any outstanding Council Tax for the period to which the claim relates will be suspended until the claim has been processed and a response issued.

7 Review

- 7.1 Decisions are subject to an appeals process. If the applicant is not satisfied with the decision, they may request a review in writing within one calendar month of the decision.
- 7.2 The request must state the reasons why the taxpayer disagrees with the decision. Additional evidence may be required to support a review.
- 7.3 The Council will provide a response within one month or as soon as practicable thereafter.
- 7.4 The outcome of the review will be given in writing, detailing the reasons for changing or upholding the original decision.

- 7.5 If the applicant remains dissatisfied with the outcome of any review, certain appeals against the Council's decision can be made to the Independent Valuation Tribunal Service. Further information about how to make an appeal can be found on the Council's website.
- 7.6 An applicant can also seek a judicial review of any decision.

8 Fraud

- 8.1 The council is committed to protecting public funds and to ensuring that funds are awarded to the people who are rightly eligible to them. An applicant who tries to fraudulently claim a discretionary discount or Exceptional Hardship payment by falsely declaring their circumstances, providing a false statement or evidence in support of their application may have committed an offence under The Fraud Act 2006 or the Theft Act 1968. Where fraud is suspected to have been committed, this matter will be investigated as appropriate and may lead to criminal proceedings being instigated.