

Council Tax Reduction Consultation

Final Results

30th September 2019

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Executive Summary

Background

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme is to help people on low incomes pay for their council tax.

On 1 April 2020 there will be a new single council for Buckinghamshire, replacing the County Council and four District Councils.

Currently in Buckinghamshire, each District Council has a different Council Tax Reduction Scheme. From April 2020 we want the new Buckinghamshire Council to have one scheme for the whole of the county so that people receive the same level of support with their council tax payments no matter where they live.

The purpose of this consultation was to gain the views of local residents and stakeholders. This consultation ran from 12 August 2019 to 24 September 2019 in the form of an online survey.

The quantitative survey was available on Buckinghamshire County Council's shadow website as an online survey widely advertised through a variety of channels. The Councils helped to ensure that stakeholders were aware of the consultation by promoting it through advertising on District websites, posters, internal communications and communication with external agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureau, Homeless Prevention Forum, Job Centres and Thames Valley Police.

Findings

There were 136 responses to the consultation, including 29 representatives of organisations.

The demographic profile of respondents was generally reflective of the Buckinghamshire population, with younger age groups and non-white ethnic groups slightly under-represented.

District or County Councils, Advice Agencies, Support Organisations and Housing Associations were represented in the respondent group.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the proposals on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, including views on who should be eligible for the scheme, what level of reduction they should receive and if support should be capped or backdated.

In general there was net positive agreement for all the proposals with some stronger than others. The highest levels of agreement were for decreasing non-dependent deduction, the earnings disregard (incentive to work) and maximum support for vulnerable groups.

Introduction

Background

The five county and district councils – Buckinghamshire County Council and Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, Wycombe and South Bucks District Councils - will become one council in April 2020. The five councils have been working together on draft proposals for a new Council Tax Reduction (Support) Scheme (CTRS) for the new Buckinghamshire Council. The scheme helps people on low incomes to pay their council tax and the proposals in the consultation apply to people of working age with a low income.

Views on the Councils' proposals were sought through an online consultation, consisting of a formal quantitative survey. Respondents were asked for their input on the proposals, including:

- Non-dependent deductions
- Earnings disregard
- Protected groups
- Band restrictions
- Backdating
- Level of contribution

Views were sought from residents, with the key target respondent groups being people who are of working age and currently receive support with their council tax bills in Buckinghamshire.

The consultation ran from 12 August 2019 to 24 September 2019.

Promotion of the Consultation

The consultation was communicated and promoted as follows:

- Banners on all District Websites
- Advertising on District email auto responses in Revenues and Benefits
- Internal staff communications (as most live in the District and/or County)
- Posters in District Council reception areas
- Conversations & emails with Citizen's Advice Bureau
- Liaison with Homeless Prevention Forum & officers
- Liaison with DWP (Job Centre Plus)
- Direct emails to Major Preceptors (Bucks Fire & Rescue and Thames Valley Police)

Methodology

Approach

This consultation ran from 12 August 2019 to 24 September 2019, consisting of a formal survey to understand the overall opinions and views of key stakeholders.

The formal survey asked for respondents' opinions on their strength of agreement, or disagreement, with the Councils' proposals for the Council Tax reduction scheme, as well as for any considerations or further comments.

The consultation was open to all stakeholders, through an online survey which was promoted through a range of channels (see the section above). The survey was open to those aged 16 or over.

Differences in opinion by group

Respondents were asked to complete a wide range of ‘classification’ questions in the survey so that the views of different groups of people or organisation could be understood where they are statistically different from other groups.

The categories of demographics that were asked and used to examine difference for residents included: age, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic ACORN category for the area that the respondent lives in.

Respondents were also asked what type of organisation they worked for, if applicable.

Other considerations

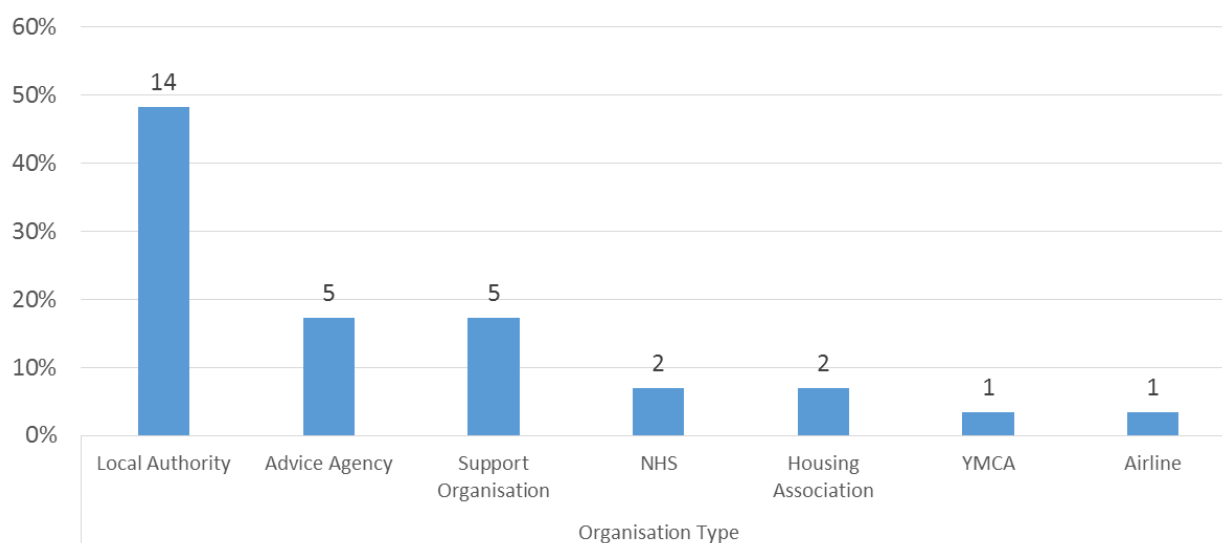
The survey was open to all residents and people representing organisations to respond – participation was self-selecting. This was not a random sample of respondents and the sample was not stratified to reflect the proportions of the people responding according to the make-up of the Buckinghamshire population. Please see the respondents profile section for more information on how the profile of respondents compares to that of the Buckinghamshire population.

Note that respondents may have completed the survey a number of times (participation was anonymous).

Profile of respondents

Organisations

29 (21%) responses were from organisations. Main organisation types that were represented were District or County Councils, Advice Agencies, Support Organisations and Housing Associations. Note some respondents selected multiple organisations.

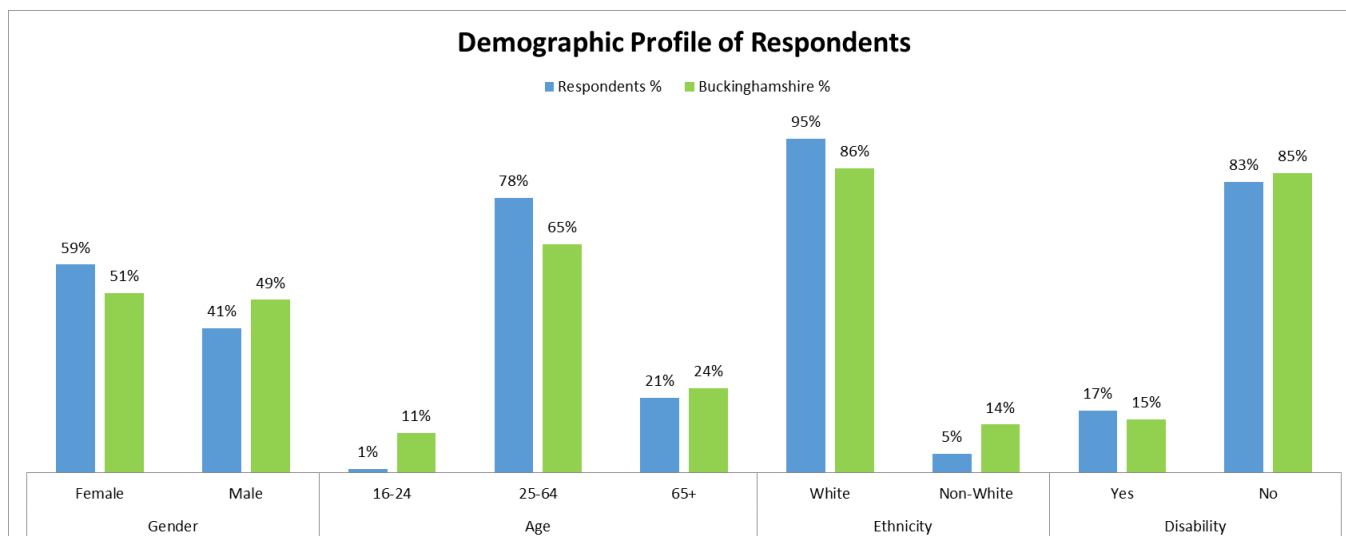


Base: 29 respondents with valid answers to this question

Where possible we have analysed any differences in views between residents and organisations, and any comments or considerations raised by each group.

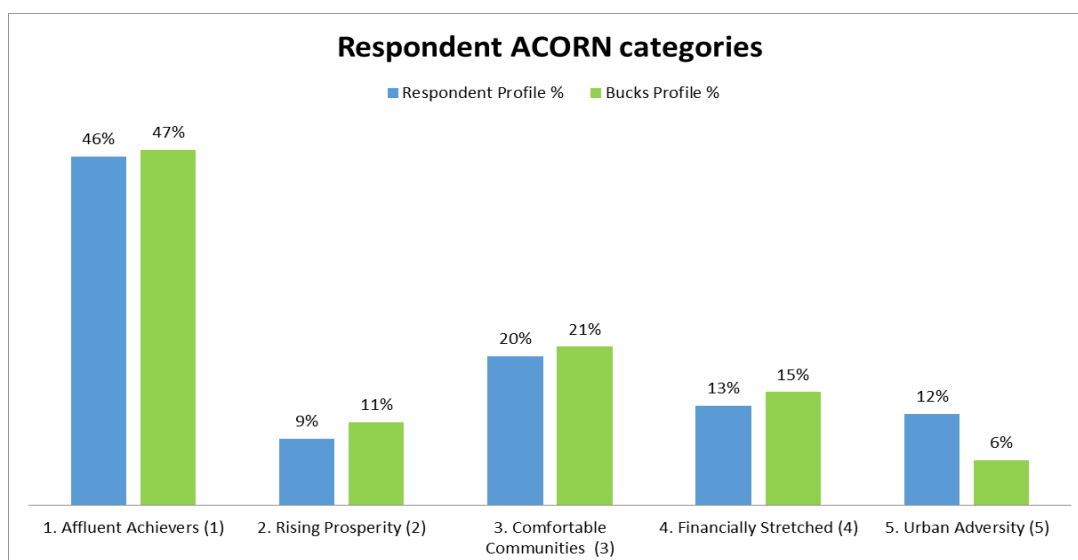
Respondent Profile

136 residents completed the survey. The profile of people responding was broadly similar to the Buckinghamshire profile across a range of other demographic characteristics. Notable statistically significant differences were that younger people and non-white ethnic groups were underrepresented, and those in the 25-64 age band were overrepresented.



Bases: Gender (100), Age (109), Ethnicity (96), Disability (103)

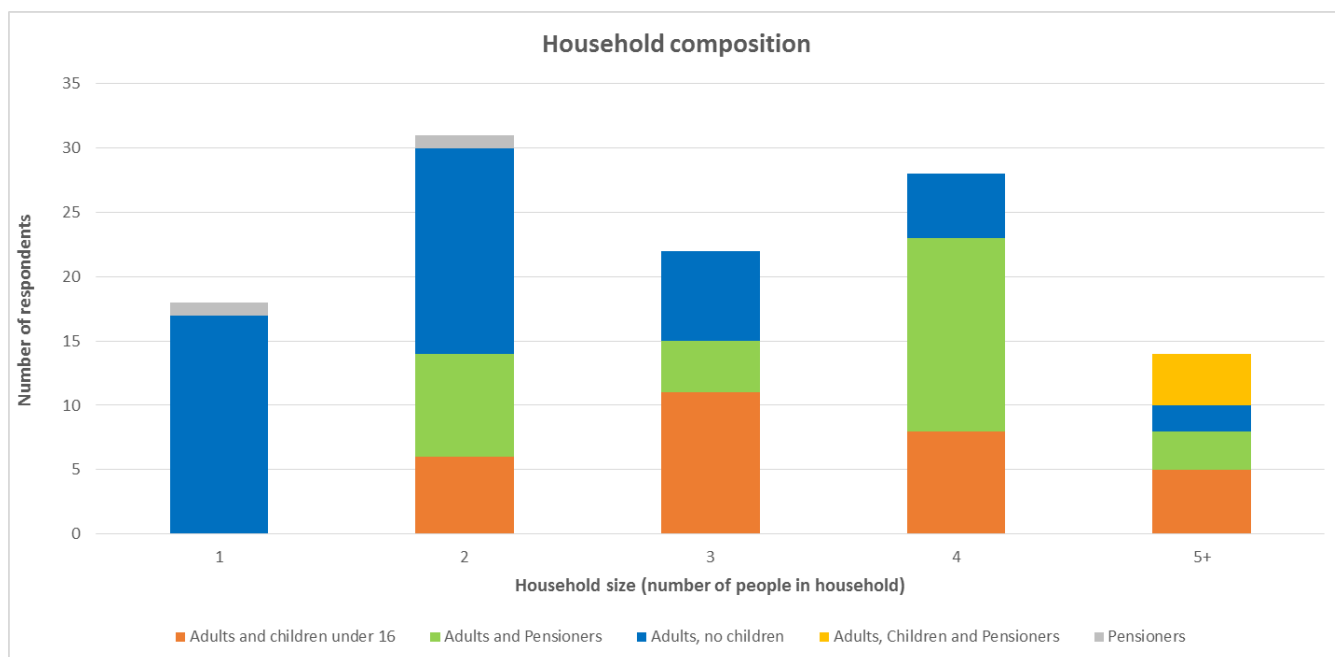
Generally the Acorn profile of respondents is representative of the Buckinghamshire population. The Urban Adversity category is over-represented, with 12% of respondents coming from this Acorn Category, compared with 6% of the Buckinghamshire population. This difference is statistically significant.



Base: 93 respondents who provided a valid postcode

The proportion of people agreeing or disagreeing with the proposals may be different for specific groups of people. Where possible we have analysed whether respondents with different demographic profiles are more likely to agree/disagree with the proposals.

Respondents were also asked questions about their household composition, and 113 gave valid responses.



Base: 113 respondents with valid answers to this question

Respondents were asked whether or not they, or anyone in their household, received Council Tax reduction (support). Only 20 respondents (15%) said that they received this support.

Questionnaire findings

Respondents were provided with an outline of the five Councils’ proposals for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (see context to the consultation above) and asked for their views and opinions regarding the proposals in the following questions.

Non-dependent deduction

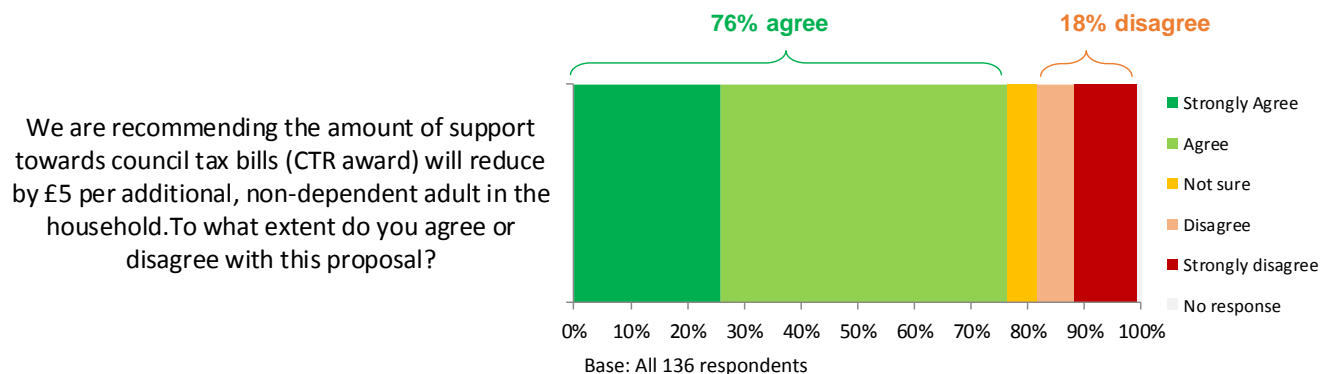
‘Non-dependent deduction’ is where the amount of support (Council Tax Reduction) may be decreased if additional adults (other than the applicant and their partner) live in the household. For example, if adult children or older relatives also live in the home. Currently, the four Buckinghamshire District Councils apply different amounts of non-dependent deduction in this situation.

The five Councils are recommending the amount of support towards council tax bills (CTR award) will reduce by £5 per additional, non-dependent adult in the household.

Respondents were asked to give an opinion on whether they agree, or disagree with this proposal.

76% of respondents agreed with this proposal, with only 18% disagreeing. There were no statistically significant differences in views between different demographic groups.

Q1. We are recommending the amount of support towards council tax bills (CTR award) will reduce by £5 per additional, non-dependent adult in the household. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal??



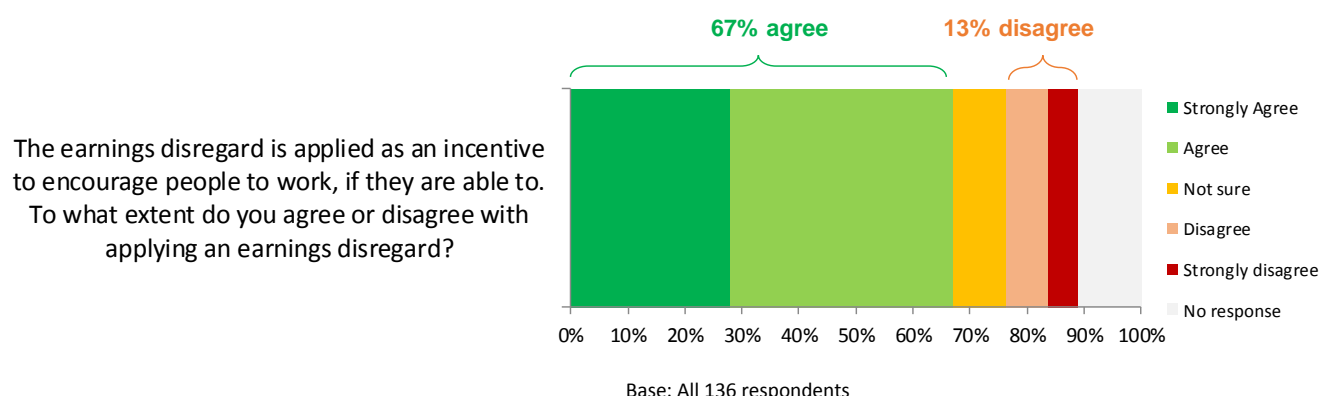
Earnings Disregard

When an applicant is in work, parts of their earnings are disregarded when we assess entitlement to a reduction in council tax. Currently, three different levels of disregard are applied across the four districts in Buckinghamshire.

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed/disagreed with applying an earnings disregard, and for the view on applying a variable rate based on the old council tax benefit scheme.

Fewer people responded to this question. There was however stronger agreement than disagreement, 67% of respondents agreed with the earnings disregard, with only 13% disagreeing. Levels of agreement were not statistically different between demographic groups.

Q2. The earnings disregard is applied as an incentive to encourage people to work, if they are able to. To what extent do you agree or disagree with applying an earnings disregard?



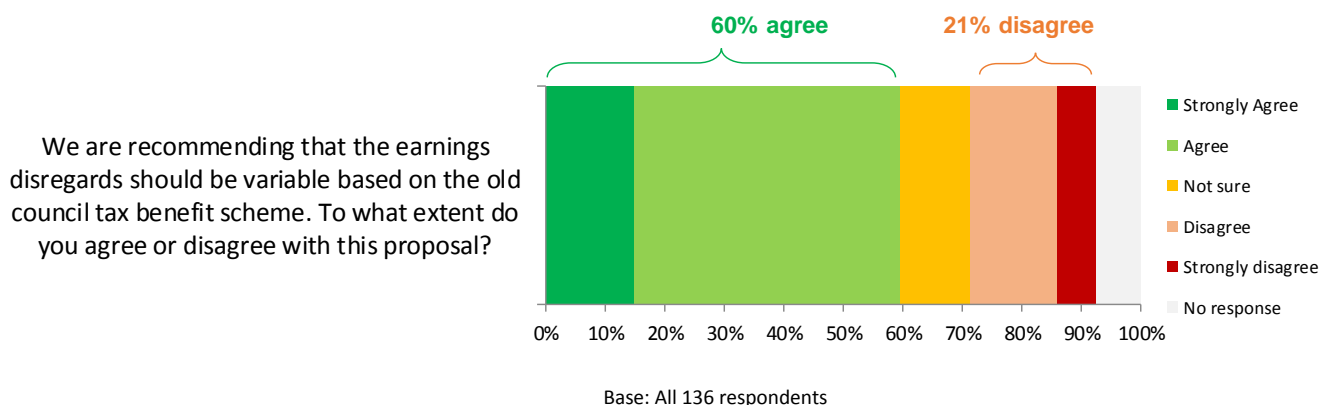
The five Councils are recommending that the earnings disregards should be variable based on the old council tax benefit scheme. The most common disregards are:

- £5 for single people
- £10 for couples
- £20 for carers
- £25 for lone parents

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with earnings disregards being variable.

Again, there was net positive agreement, with 60% agreeing that the earnings disregard should be variable. There were stronger levels of disagreement with this proposal from respondents with disabilities when compared with those without disabilities.

Q3. We are recommending that the earnings disregards should be variable based on the old council tax benefit scheme. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



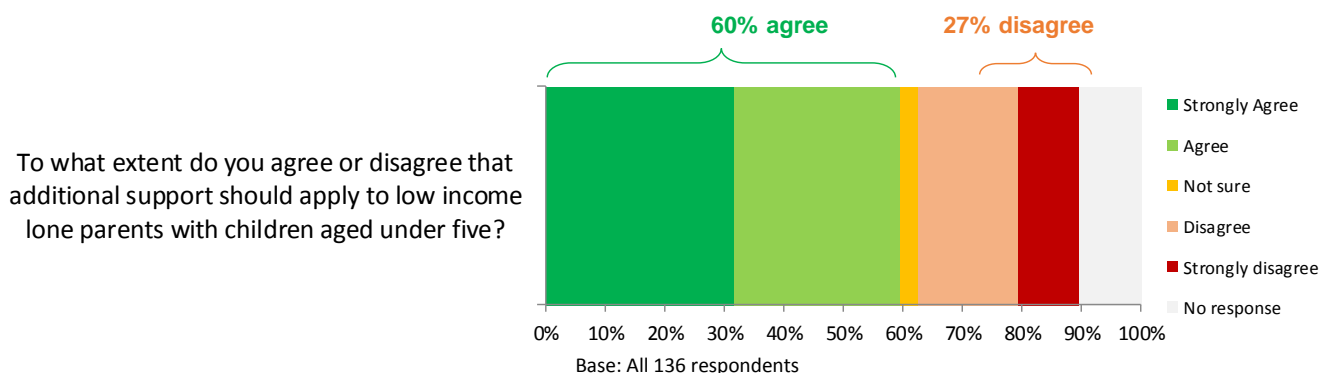
Additional help for low income households with children aged under five

The five Councils are recommending that single parents who are on a low income and have children aged under five can receive maximum council tax support. This means they can receive up to 100% support for their council tax bills (and therefore not have any council tax to pay).

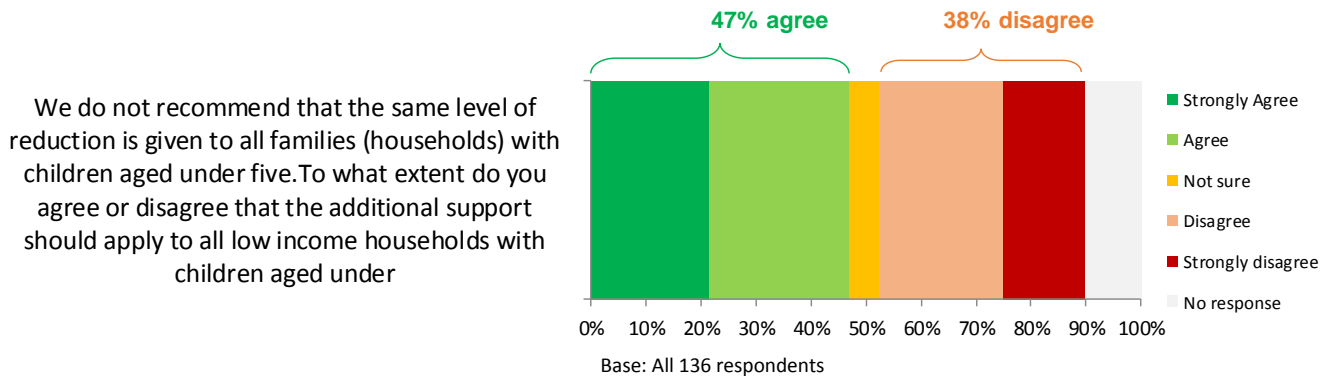
Respondents were asked whether they agreed with this policy, and whether or not the same levels should be applied to all low income households with children under 5. If the support was extended to all these households, it could be funded by increase in council tax or reduction in funding for other council services. Respondents were asked which would be their preferred means of funding, or whether they had any other suggestions, by means of a free text response.

60% of respondents agreed that additional support should be offered to low income lone parents with children under 5. Fewer (47%) agreed that this benefit should be extended to all low income parents with children under 5. **However, there was net positive agreement overall.**

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that additional support should apply to low income lone parents with children aged under five?

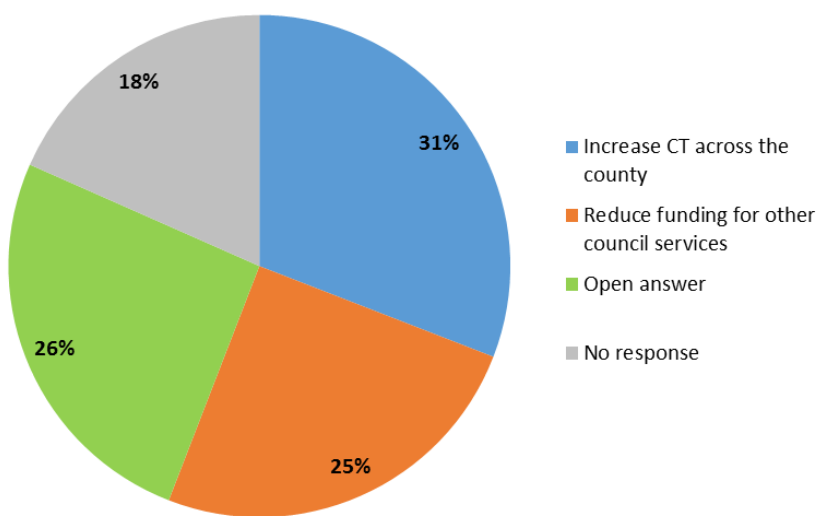


Q5. We do not recommend that the same level of reduction is given to all families (households) with children aged under five. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the additional support should apply to all low income households with children aged under five?



If additional support were to be extended to all low income households with children under 5, respondents believed it should be funded by an increase in council tax (31%), reduced funding for other council services (25%). 26% of respondents thought this could be funded by other means, with suggestions such as reducing inefficiencies and staff salaries in the council, and charging more to those on higher incomes. 12 respondents suggested this reduction should not be offered to low income families at all.

Q6. If the additional support for council tax is extended to all low income households (families and single parents) with children aged under five, how do you think the council should fund this?



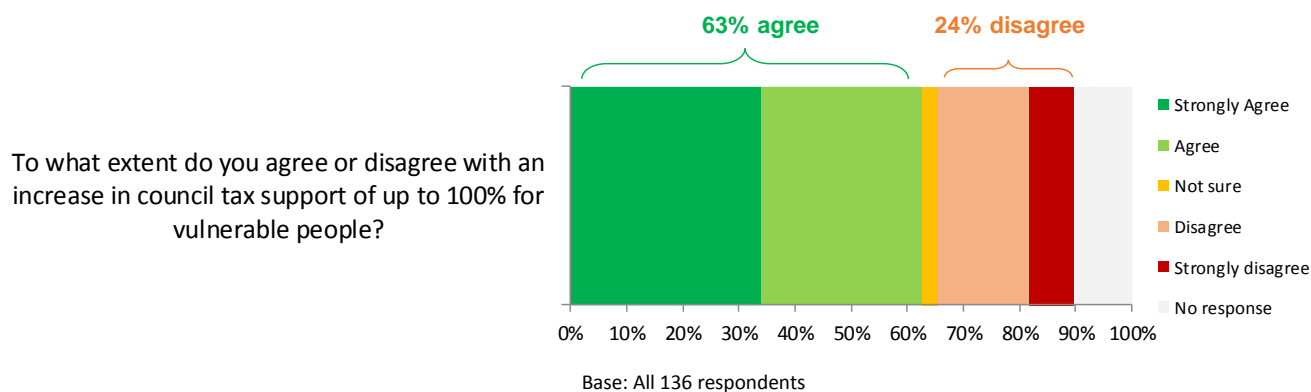
Base: All 136 respondents

Level of Contribution

It is recommended that some of our most vulnerable residents are offered up to 100% council tax support (Council Tax Reduction). For example, this would include applicants who receive a qualifying disability benefit and lone parents with children aged under five. Support for council tax bills (CTR) is a means tested benefit, which means people’s income will be used to calculate the amount of support (CTR) that they receive.

63% agreed and 24% disagreed with an increase in council tax support of up to 100% for vulnerable people. There were no statistically different responses between different demographic groups.

Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with an increase in council tax support of up to 100% for vulnerable people?



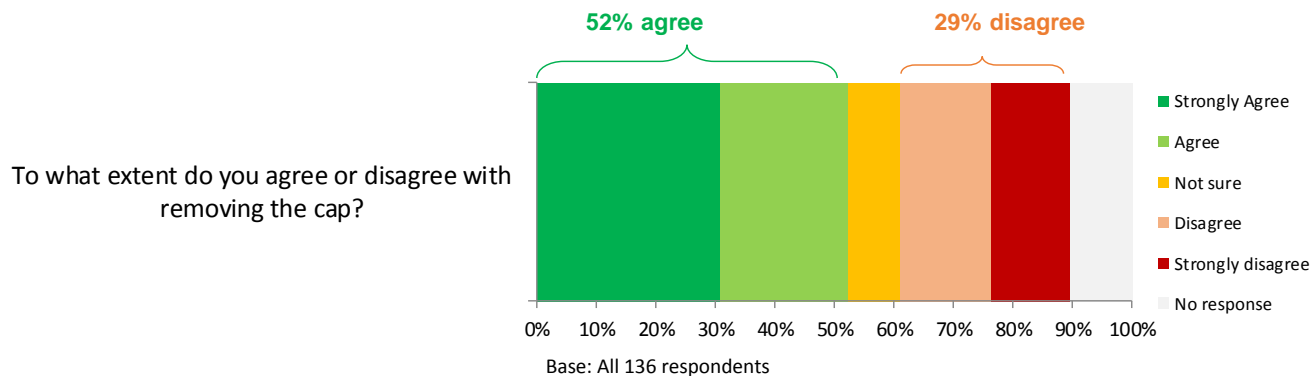
Band Restriction

Respondents were asked for their views on whether the amount of council tax support is capped at a particular council tax property band level (for example band D). If support was limited to a band D property then someone living in a higher banded property (e.g. band E) would have to pay the additional amount of council tax between a band D & E. Currently, only Chiltern District Council apply a cap based on council tax property band levels.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed/disagreed with removing the council tax support cap.

Agreement levels were slightly lower than in previous questions, but still **over half (52%) of respondents agreed that the council tax band cap should be removed.** Respondents from organisations were statistically more likely to agree that the cap should be removed.

Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with removing the cap?

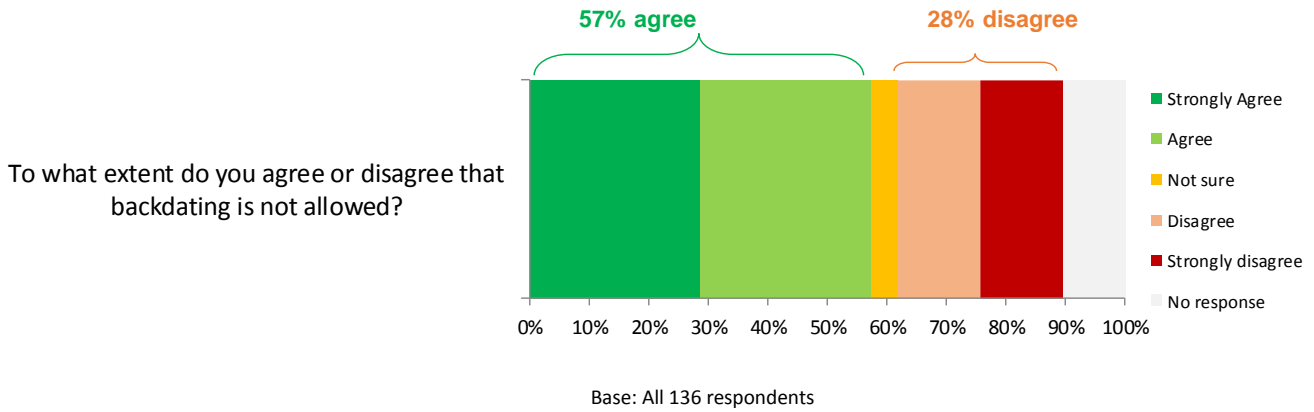


Backdating

Respondents were asked for their views on whether claims should start from the date the application form is received, and that no backdating will be allowed.

57% of respondents agreed and 28% disagreed with allowing backdating of claims. Female respondents were statistically more likely to agree that backdating should not be allowed.

Q9. To what extent do you agree or disagree that backdating is not allowed?



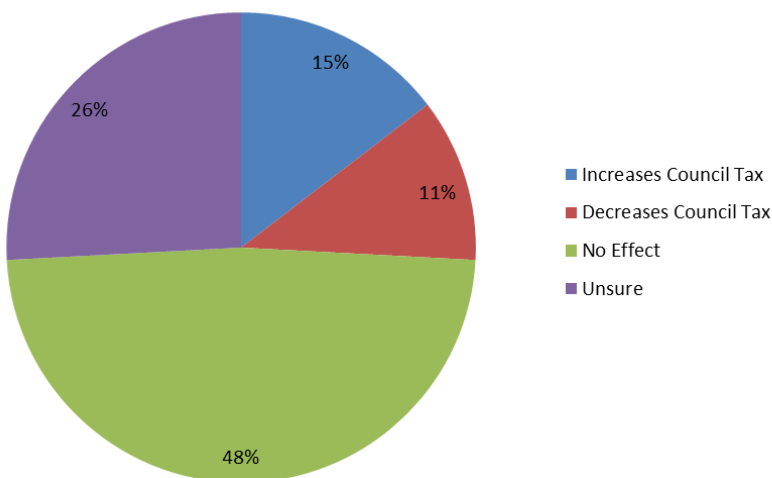
Respondent Comments

Respondents were asked if they had any comments on:

- How do you think the recommended changes will affect your household? (free text)
- Are there any other changes you think we should consider? (free text)
- Are there any other comments you would like to make? (free text)

These questions enabled respondents to let us know their opinions and views in their own words. Respondents raised a range of different issues, so to better understand the key themes, answers to these questions have been categorised into the most common themes that respondents raised.

Of the 89 respondents who responded to the question asking whether the recommended changes would affect their household, most (48%) thought it would have no effect, 15% thought their council tax would increase and 11% thought it would decrease. 26% were unsure how the changes would affect them.

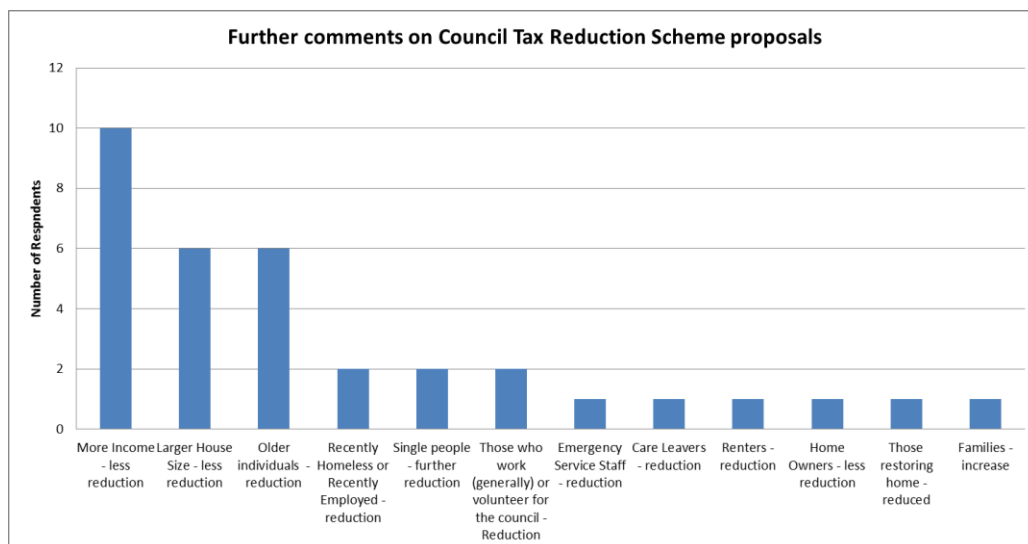


Base: 89 respondents with valid answers to this question

Other suggestions for changes that respondents would like to see considered by the new council included:

- reducing council tax across the whole county
- provide more incentive to work rather than offer reductions
- universal council tax price for all residents
- provide clear communication and administrative support so people are aware who is eligible and how to claim

Other comments that were made are summarised in the chart below. Key themes were that high income earners in large houses should pay more, and groups such as older people, Emergency Services staff, care leavers and renters should receive more support with their council tax.



Base: 34 respondents with valid answers to this question

A selection of verbatim comments from the open response questions are shown below:

"I'd be willing to pay extra Council Tax if it meant additional support for vulnerable residents."

- Female, 25-64, Aylesbury

"Higher income and house values (should) pay more."

- Female, 25-64

"There should be no 100% rate (for vulnerable residents), everyone should pay something"

- Male, 25-64, Buckingham

"You should consider the size of the houses where people have added to their property"

- Female, 65+, Slough

"You should consider elderly people. It's all well and good wanting to help those single parents with their children but what about helping those who are retired and cannot afford to make ends meet. They do not have the option of being able to get work and would be more beneficial in receiving assistance."

- Female, 25-64

Appendix

Questions

The following questions were asked to all respondents. See questionnaire for full details.

- We are recommending the amount of support towards council tax bills (CTR award) will reduce by £5 per additional, non-dependent adult in the household. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?
- The earnings disregard is applied as an incentive to encourage people to work, if they are able to. To what extent do you agree or disagree with applying an earnings disregard?
- We are recommending that the earnings disregards should be variable based on the old council tax benefit scheme. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree that additional support should apply to low income lone parents with children aged under five?
- We do not recommend that the same level of reduction is given to all families (households) with children aged under five. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the additional support should apply to all low income households with children aged under five?
- If the additional support for council tax is extended to all low income households (families and single parents) with children aged under five, how do you think the council should fund this?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree with an increase in council tax support of up to 100% for vulnerable people?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree with removing the cap on council tax property band levels?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree that backdating is not allowed?
- How do you think the recommended changes will affect your household? (free text)
- Are there any other changes you think we should consider? (free text)
- Are there any other comments you would like to make? (free text)
- Do you work for any of the following types of organisation?
 - Housing association
 - Advice agency
 - Support organisation
 - Other
- How many children aged under 16 live in your home?
- Including yourself how many adults aged sixteen or over live in your home?
- How many pensioners live in your house?
- What is your full postcode?

- What age band do you fall in?
- What is your gender?
- How would you describe your ethnic origin?
- Do you have a disability?

Sampling

Market Research looks to understand the views and opinions of a population using a sample of the population of interest. The sample (or respondents) views are used to represent the views and opinions of the whole population so that a full Census of opinion (obtaining everyone’s views) is not necessary – which can be impractical.

As the results of quantitative surveys are based on samples, Market Research use statistical information to show the level of tolerance associated with results. The tolerance level is associated with a range of factors including the number of people responding to the survey. The information below provides a guide as to the level of tolerance (or confidence interval) that is generally associated with samples according to the number of people responding (note that other factors may also be taken into account including self-selection and geographic distribution).

The confidence with which we can make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95% - that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the "true" value will fall within a specified range. The following illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the "95% confidence interval":

Size of sample on which survey result is based	Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels		
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
	±	±	±
100 responses	6	9	10
200 responses	4	6	7
500 responses	3	4	4
1,000 responses	2	3	3

For example, with a sample size of 1,000 where 70% give a particular answer, the chances are, that 95 out of 100 times in conducting surveys that the "true" value (i.e. the one which would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed) will fall within the range of ±3 percentage points from the survey result (i.e. between 67% and 73%).

NB: Strictly speaking the tolerances shown here apply only to random samples; in practice good quality quota sampling has been found to be as accurate.

Consultation Questionnaire

Online survey can be found via the following link:

<https://shadow.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/consultations/counciltaxreduction/>