



Report to Council

Date:	22 February 2023
Title:	Care Leaver Council Tax Disregard
Cabinet Member(s):	Councillor John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources
Contact officer:	Mark Preston Mark.Preston@buckinghamshire.gov.uk
Ward(s) affected:	
Recommendations:	Council are requested to APPROVE the adoption of the Discretionary Council Tax Discount Scheme for Buckinghamshire Council Care Leavers as shown in Appendix A
Reason for decision:	The recommended approach ensures that all eligible care leavers receive the support they are entitled to and reduces the administration costs for both the Leaving Care team and the Council Tax team.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The introduction of a Discretionary Council Tax Discount scheme for Buckinghamshire Council Care Leavers works alongside our Local Offer to support young care leavers in taking on the responsibility of having their own property and being able to support themselves financially.
- 1.2 One of the key points of the Local Offer is for Buckinghamshire Council to meet the obligation of paying Council Tax for the Care Leaver up until the age of 21 where they continue to interact with the Leaving Care team.
- 1.3 The report proposes a policy framework that sets out the Council's approach to the award of discretionary Council Tax discount for Care Leavers from April 2023.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 Currently Children's Services have a "Local Offer" to support care leavers up to the age of 21. This includes paying any council tax due, after any discounts or benefit have been applied.
- 2.2 Under Council Tax legislation the Council can set local discounts that apply to certain properties and/or certain groups of people.
- 2.3 Rather than Children's Services having to pay these charges, we propose that it would be more efficient to apply the discount directly to the council tax account. Discounts will match the current offer:
 - a) 75% discount for single care leavers and a 25% single person discount making 100%.
 - b) 50% discount for care leavers who share a property with one other person.
 - c) 33% discount for care leavers who share a property with two people.
- 2.4 The discount is proportionate to the number of residents liable for council tax in the property. For example, a care leaver sharing a property with three people would receive a 25% discount.
- 2.5 Discounts to apply until the care leaver turns 21 years old. From this date no discount to apply and the care leaver will be liable to pay any council tax left due after any other disregards or benefits are applied.
- 2.6 If approved the change can take effect from 1st April 2023.
- 2.7 The benefits of introducing this policy are:
 - a) It brings Buckinghamshire Council in line with other Councils who already offer this local discount, including many in the surrounding areas and other large unitary authorities e.g. Birmingham, Croydon, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham, Durham, Luton, Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council.
 - b) Removes the need for the care leaver to forward bills to Children's Services for payment.
 - c) Reduced risk of recovery notices being sent as discount can be applied at source.
 - d) Care leaver has sight of bill and gains an understanding of council tax.
 - e) Greater customer care for a vulnerable group.

- f) Potential efficiency and cost savings in notifying direct to the Council Tax team.

2.8 Appendix A shows the proposed policy.

3. Other options considered

3.1 The local offer could continue but this relies on the care leaver sending the council tax bills to the Leaving Care team for payment. Some care leavers fail to do this and therefore do not receive the discount on offer and unnecessary reminders and summonses are issued at a cost to the council.

3.2 With the proposed policy in place the Leaving Care team will notify the Council Tax team of any person leaving care and the appropriate council tax discount can be applied to their new address. As a result, the Leaving Care business support team will no longer need to process the bills for payment and the Council Tax team will issue fewer bills, and reminder letters.

4. Legal and financial implications

4.1 Section 13a(1)(c) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the Council has the power to reduce the amount of Council Tax a person must pay. This includes the power to reduce the amount to nil and may be applied in relation to specified cases, or by determining a particular type of property in which liability is to be reduced.

4.2 There is a cost to the Council in respect of Council Tax Discretionary Discounts awards and this is met by the Council's General Fund. Budget provision has been set aside to support this scheme and meet the cost. The cost of the local offer in the 2022/23 year is £38,610. The net cost to the council is nil as Children's Services budgets were already funding the cost of the "local offer".

5. Corporate implications

5.1 This report supports the climate change priorities of the corporate plan as it will result in fewer paper bills being issued and will lead to a more sustainable operation of council tax administration by the resulting improved efficiency of the process.

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

6.1 No consultation has occurred.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 Consultation has taken place with the Leaving Care team to agree the process to ensure that all eligible care leavers receive the support they are entitled to, with the costs being met from the existing Children's Services budget.
- 7.2 The Care Leavers themselves will be notified about what is happening by the Leaving Care team to explain that they will be getting a Council Tax bill, but they don't need to pay it and can apply for care leaver discount.
- 7.3 There are no communication implications.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 If this report is approved, the discretionary policy will come into force from the 1st April 2023.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 Appendix A – Discretionary Council Tax Discount Scheme for Buckinghamshire Council Care Leavers

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by email to democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk.