

Equality Impact Assessment: Council Tax increase

Officer responsible for completing EIA: Head of Resident Experience	Manager responsible for EIA: Head of Resident Experience
Strategic Director responsible for EIA: Strategic Director - Communities	Date last updated: 22 February 2024

1. Introduction

This Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) seeks to identify impacts and effect of this proposal with the aim of assessing whether it would have a disparate impact on persons with a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. As part of this assessment, consideration will be given to ways in which any such impact can be avoided or mitigated, any negative impacts arising from this proposal will be assessed and where this could be reduced in their impact this will be noted in the attached action plan.

The Council also recognises that it may not completely remove all negative impacts.

The purpose is to provide impartial information to assist in the decision-making process and inform rather than determine policy. The objective is not to make the decision but to assist decision makers through the provision of relevant information. This Equality Impact Assessment seeks to identify the impacts and effects on local Council Taxpayers of a proposed increase of 10% (Woking element and to detail any mitigating actions that will be put into place to support those least able to pay.

The Council faces a critical financial shortfall owing to its historic investment strategy which has resulted in unaffordable borrowing, inadequate steps to repay that borrowing and high values of irrecoverable loans. To address these severe financial challenges the Council must make significant saving alongside taking steps to 'live within its means' in the future. The proposed Council Tax increase will support balancing the budget for 2024/25 and is considered appropriate and proportionate by the Government. The Secretary of State has agreed special measures to allow Woking Borough Council to increase its Council Tax element by 10%, without having a referendum, that would otherwise be required for an increase of that scale.

2. Impact on services:

The number of Council Tax properties across all Bands (A to H) is currently c.44,000. All will be impacted by the 10% increase of the Woking element.

Woking is a lower tier Council, consequently the 10% increase to the Woking Borough Council element equates to just over a 1% increase on the overall charge. [Woking Borough Council's element](#) currently accounts for 12% of the overall Council Tax charge. Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner accounts for 13% and Surrey County Council 75%.

Woking Brough Council's element for a band D property is £263.12. A 10% increase would represent a yearly increase of £26, equivalent to 50p per week, for households paying the full band D charge.

The current Council Tax Support Scheme provides help towards Council Tax bills for those on low incomes. Woking has a 100% Council Tax Support Scheme in place to protect the vulnerable This supports over 3,600 households to both working age and pensioners.

Any Increase in the Council Tax charge will result in relevant increases in the Council Tax Support award to claimants, thus negating the increases to these charge payers.

3. Engagement and consultation

The Council has carried out engagement on ensuring a balanced budget for the 2024/25 financial year.

The **first phase of the engagement** took place in **summer 2023**. Residents and businesses had the opportunity to have their say on how to tackle the budget shortfall. [Help shape the future of discretionary council services | Woking Community Forum](#) 10% of respondents supported an increase Council Tax for everyone.

		Positive impact?			Negative impact?	No specific impact	<p>What will the impact be? If the impact is negative, how can it be mitigated? These need to be included in the action plan below.</p> <p>This section needs to be completed as evidence of what the positive impact is or what actions are being taken to mitigate any negative impacts</p>
		Eliminate discrimination	Advance equality	Good relations			
Gender	Men					x	
	Women					x	Lone parents more likely to be women. If they are on low income, support will be provided via the Council Tax Support scheme.
Gender Reassignment						x	
Race	White					x	No information is held on the ethnicity of households or those claiming support with Council Tax. However, there is unlikely to be any specific impact on this group.
	Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups					x	As above
	Asian/Asian British					x	As above
	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British					x	As above
	Gypsies / travellers					x	As above
	Other ethnic group					x	As above

<p>Disability</p>	<p>Physical</p>					<p>x</p>	<p>13.6 % of Woking residents are disabled (2021 Census) A significant proportion will not be working or be on a low income.</p> <p>Mitigations: A discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme already exists, which can reduce the amount of Council Tax that has to be paid by certain households, that have exhausted all other options. Payments can cover up to 100% of the bill, capped to a maximum equivalent of a band D charge.</p> <p>Woking Borough Council also has a Council Tax Support scheme that covers up to 100% of the Council Tax bill, for some households on low incomes. The scheme is means tested, with payments restricted to a maximum value of a band D charge for working age residents, who must be eligible to at least £5 per week. Other than being means tested, restrictions do not apply to pensioners.</p> <p>You may qualify if you are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on Income Support, Jobseekers' Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance or Universal Credit • on Pension Credit, Guaranteed Credit and in some cases Savings Credit • working and on low pay (including people who are self-employed) • on a low income, for example, you might only get a retirement pension or be getting social security benefits, like Incapacity Benefit. <p>Discretionary Council Tax support can be considered, in exceptional circumstances, for households in need of additional support, to pay their Council Tax bills. To be eligible applicants must be in receipt of an award of Council Tax Support.</p> <p>Assistance is available to individuals to enable them to claim support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Visiting Officer is available for those most in need and unable to attend the Civic Offices. • WBC Customer Services provide guidance via phone and in person (eg. assistance with completing forms is provided on an appointment basis). • Computers are available in WBC reception for people to use if they do not have access at home and support is available from customer services staff. • Advice and assistance on financial wellbeing and support is available from voluntary sector organisations, eg. CAW, The Lighthouse and other faith-based organisations in Woking. • Referrals for support will be made to Social Prescribing Team if appropriate. <p>Appeals and revision processes are in place for decisions concerning Council Tax reductions Appeals and revisions Woking Borough Council</p> <p>The Council is proposing resourcing Citizen's Advice Woking (CAW) to provide a Hardship Support Coordination package. See Action Plan below.</p>
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	Sensory					x	As above
	Learning Difficulties					x	As above
	Mental Health					x	

Sexual Orientation	Lesbian, gay men, bisexual					x	
Age	Older people					x	16.5% of Woking residents are aged 65 and over. Approx 40% of those claiming Council Tax support are pensioners. Mitigation: As Above
	Younger people				x		12% of children living in poverty (DWP, Dec 2022). 8.8% of households in Woking are lone parent household (2021 Census), who are more likely to have children living in poverty. Mitigation: As above Support for families with children is provided by the Council's family support services, Surrey County Council and local voluntary organisations such as Homestart Woking & Runnymede.
Religion or Belief	Faith Groups					x	
Pregnancy & maternity						x	
Marriage & Civil Partnership						x	

Socio-economic Background			x		<p>Approx 1,600 people aged 16 and over in Woking were unemployed in the year ending June 2023. This is a rate of 3.0%. (DWP).</p> <p>Approx 9,300 people or about 15.3% of the population aged 16 to 64 years in Woking were "economically inactive" in the year ending June 2023 (small sample so likely to be under representative). (DWP) In the 2021 Census the figure was 33.4%.</p> <p>Mitigation:</p> <p>As above</p>
Carers				x	<p>8.3% of Woking residents are carers. (2021 Census).</p> <p>Mitigation:</p> <p>It will be as above for those on low income or in receipt of benefits.</p>
Other identified groups	(Please specify)				Non identified

ACTION PLAN:

Actions identified from EIA	Target completion date	Responsible Officer	Comments
It is suggested that the Council sets a budget of £25,000 for the Hardship Relief Scheme, to ensure payments are not excessive and are affordable.	1 April 2024	Head of Resident Experience	
It is suggested that the Council sets up a flexible hardship fund of £25,000 (replicating the Household Support Fund) to support wider hardship issues that may result from increased Council Tax payments.	1 April 2024	Head of Living Well	
Ensure information, support and advice is accessible to all. Customer Services provide support via telephone and face to face (eg. appointments for completing forms)	1 April 2024	Head of Resident Experience	
<p>The Council is proposing resourcing Citizen's Advice Woking (CAW) to provide a Hardship Support Coordination package. The full details of the package are still being scoped, but high-level objectives are likely to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Supporting volunteers from CAW to continue to provide advice services (related to debt, money management, employment etc) within their new business model.- Working with partners and community groups to identify and map the range of hardship support services available across Woking, in order to produce a comprehensive directory.- Delivering an "Advice First Aid" approach to upskill volunteers	1 April 2024	Strategic Director - Communities	

<p>within faith and community groups to expand knowledge locally of the range of services that customers can be signposted to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively signposting clients to a range of providers of hardship support. - Facilitating a network of hardship support providers across Woking, bringing together the variety of voluntary, community and faith organisations, and ensuring that information is shared and voluntary capacity maximised. - Monitor the impacts of the increased Council tax and gaps in service provision, building community capacity where required. 			
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SIGN OFF:

STRATEGIC DIRECTOR: Louise Strongitharm	DATE: 22/02/24
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