

CUSTOMER SERVICES

Council Tax Support Scheme
Exceptional Hardship Fund Policy



PLYMOUTH
CITY COUNCIL

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I. BACKGROUND

The Exceptional Hardship Fund (EHF) has been set up by Plymouth City Council to cover the shortfall between Council Tax liability and payments of Council Tax Support and is effective from 01 April 2013. The policy was updated to take account of changes to the Council Tax Support scheme for working age customers from April 2017.

This is an updated policy to take account of changes to the Council Tax Support scheme for working age customers from April 2020 and to allow financial assistance to be given to customers who are affected by these changes.

2. PURPOSE OF THIS POLICY

The purpose of this policy is to specify how Plymouth City Council's Customer Service Department will operate the scheme, and to indicate some of the factors which will be considered when deciding if an Exceptional Hardship Fund payment can be made.

Each case will be treated on its own merits and all customers will be treated fairly and equally in their accessibility to the Fund and also the decisions made with applications.

Where a customer is not claiming a Council Tax discount or exemption to which they may be entitled or a welfare benefit or additional financial assistance, they will be advised, and where necessary assisted, in making a claim to maximise their income, before their claim for Exceptional Hardship Funds will be decided.

3. EXCEPTIONAL HARDSHIP FUND AND EQUALITIES

The creation of an Exceptional Hardship Fund meets Plymouth City Council's obligations under the Equalities Act.

The Government has been clear that, in developing a local Council Tax Support scheme, vulnerable groups should be protected. Other than statutory protection for low income pensioners, the Government has not prescribed the other groups that local Councils should support. Plymouth City Council has designed their Council Tax Support scheme to take account of the various statutes that currently protect vulnerable people.

We recognise the importance of protecting our most vulnerable customers and also the impact these changes have. We have created an Exceptional Hardship Fund to ensure that we protect and support those most in need. The Exceptional Hardship Fund is intended to help in cases of **extreme** financial hardship and not support a lifestyle. Whilst there is no legal definition of 'Exceptional Hardship' for the purposes of this policy it should be considered to be 'hardship that is beyond that which would normally be suffered'

4. STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

The Customer Service Department will seek through the operation of this policy to:

- Allow a short period of time for someone to adjust to unforeseen short-term circumstances and to enable them to “bridge the gap” during this time.
- Support people in managing their finances.
- Help customers through personal crises and difficult events that affect their finances and their ability to pay.
- Aim to help prevent exceptional hardship.
- Support vulnerable young people in the transition to adult life.
- Helping those who are trying to help themselves financially.
- Alleviate poverty.
- Sustain tenancies and prevention of homelessness.
- Keep families together.
- Encourage and support people to obtain and sustain employment.
- Give support to those who are financially vulnerable.

The Exceptional Hardship Fund is a short-term emergency fund, awarded whilst the customer seeks alternative solutions.

It cannot be awarded for the following circumstances:

- Where full Council Tax liability is being met by Council Tax Support.
- For any other reason, other than to reduce Council Tax liability.
- Where the Council considers that there are unnecessary expenses or/debts which the customer has not taken reasonable steps to reduce.
- To reduce any Council Tax Support recoverable overpayment.
- To cover previous years Council Tax arrears.
- Where there is a shortfall caused by a Department for Work and Pensions sanction or suspension being applied because the customer has turned down work/interview/training opportunities.
- When Council Tax Support is suspended.

5. AWARDING AN EXCEPTIONAL HARDSHIP FUND PAYMENT

Every customer who is entitled to Council Tax Support and who has a shortfall is entitled to make a claim for help from the Fund. It is normally a short-term emergency fund, whilst the Council Taxpayer seeks alternative solutions.

- a) From 01 April 2020 working age customers whose Council Tax Support has ceased due to changes to the Council Tax Support scheme from 01 April 2020 will be entitled to make a claim for help where an application to the Hardship Fund is made within 6 weeks of Council Tax Support ceasing.

The main features of the Fund are that:

- Exceptional Hardship Fund awards are discretionary.
- Customers do not have a statutory right to an award.
- The Exceptional Hardship Fund Policy is held within the main Council Tax Support scheme.
- Exceptional Hardship Fund awards are not a payment of the main Council Tax Support scheme.
- It is a cash limited fund.
- The Customer Services Department decides how the Fund is administered.
- Council Tax Support must be in payment in the week in which an Exceptional Hardship Fund award is made.
 - Where 5(a) above applies, Council Tax Support must have been in payment in the 6 weeks prior to application to the Fund being made;
- Plymouth City Council may decide that a backdated Exceptional Hardship award is appropriate; which could then settle council tax arrears. This would be the only circumstance where the Exceptional Hardship Fund could be used to facilitate payment of Council Tax arrears.

In addition to this fund there is a Discretionary Housing Payments scheme which covers the shortfall between rent and Housing Benefit.

The Customer Service Department will decide whether or not to make an Exceptional Hardship Fund award, and how much, and for what period, any award might be.

When making this decision the Customer Service Department will consider:

- The shortfall between Council Tax Support and Council Tax liability.
- The steps taken by the customer to reduce their Council Tax liability.
- Changing payment methods, re-profiling Council Tax instalments or setting alternative payment arrangements in order to make them affordable.
- To ensure that all appropriate discounts, exemptions and reductions are granted.
- Steps taken by the customer to establish whether they are entitled to other welfare benefits.
- Steps taken by the customer in considering and identifying where possible the most economical tariffs for supply of utilities.
- If a Discretionary Housing Payment has already been awarded to meet a shortfall in rent.
- The personal circumstances, age and medical circumstances (including ill health and disabilities) of the customer, their partner and any dependants and any other occupants of the customer's home.
- The difficulty experienced by the customer which prohibits them from being able to meet their Council Tax liability, and the length of time this difficulty will exist.
- Shortfalls due to non-dependant deductions.

- The income and expenditure of the customer, their partner and any dependants or other occupants of the customer's home.
- How deemed reasonable expenditure exceeds income.
- That all income may be taken into account, including those which are disregarded when awarding Council Tax Support.
- In the case of self-employed lone parents who are responsible for a child aged 5 to 12 years where the minimum income floor applies will be considered where the applicant is unable to work 35 hours per week.
- Any savings or capital that might be held by the customer or their partner.
- Other debts outstanding for the customer and their partner.
- Whether the customer has already accessed or is engaging for assistance with budgeting and financial/debt management advice. An Exceptional Hardship Fund award may not be made until the customer has accepted assistance either from the Council or third party, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau or similar organisations, to enable them to manage their finances more effectively, including the termination of non-essential expenditure.
- The exceptional nature of the customer and/or their family's circumstances that impact on finances.
- The length of time they have lived in the property.
- The amount available in the Exceptional Hardship Fund at the time of the application.

The list is not exhaustive and other relevant factors and special circumstances will be considered.

An award from the Exceptional Hardship Fund does not guarantee that a further award will be made at a later date, even if the customer's circumstances have not changed.

An Exceptional Hardship Fund award may be less than the difference between the Council Tax liability and the amount of Council Tax Support paid.

6. PUBLICITY

The Customer Service Department will publicise the Fund and will work with interested parties to achieve this. A copy of this policy will be made available for inspection and will be published on the Council's website.

7. MAKING A CLAIM

A customer must make a claim for an Exceptional Hardship Fund award by submitting an application to Plymouth City Council. The application can be obtained by downloading the form on the Council's website, or by requesting the form via the telephone or in person at the One Stop Shop. Customers can get assistance with the completion of the form from the Customer Service Department.

The application form must be fully completed and supporting information or evidence provided, as reasonably requested by the Council.

In most cases the person who claims the Exceptional Hardship Fund award will be the person entitled to Council Tax Support. However, a claim can be accepted from someone acting on another's behalf, such as an appointee, if it is considered reasonable.

8. CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

The Customer Service Department may revise an award from the Exceptional Hardship Fund where the customer's circumstances have changed which either increases or reduces their Council Tax support entitlement

9. DUTIES OF THE CUSTOMER

A person claiming an Exceptional Hardship Fund Payment is required to:

- Give the Council such information as it may require to make a decision.
- Tell the Council of any changes in circumstances that may be relevant to their on-going claim within 21 days of the change occurring.
- Give the Council such other information as it may require in connection with their claim.

10. AMOUNT AND DURATION OF AWARD

Both the amount and the duration of the award are determined at the discretion of the Council, and will be done on the basis of the evidence supplied and the circumstances of the claim.

The start date will usually be the Monday after the application for an Exceptional Hardship Fund award is received by the Customer Service Department, although in some cases it may be possible to backdate this award, based upon individual circumstances of each case.

The Exceptional Hardship Fund will normally be awarded for a minimum of one week.

The maximum length of the award will not exceed the end of the financial year in which the award is given.

Plymouth City Council aim to make a decision within 14 days of receiving all the information required.

11. PAYMENT OF AWARD

Any Exceptional Hardship Fund award will be made directly into the customer's Council Tax account, thus reducing the amount of Council Tax payable.

12. OVERPAID EXCEPTIONAL HARDSHIP FUND PAYMENTS

Overpaid Exceptional Hardship Fund awards will generally be recovered directly from the customers council tax account, thus increasing the amount of Council Tax due and payable.

13. NOTIFICATION OF AN AWARD

The Council will notify the outcome of each application for Exceptional Hardship Fund awards in writing. The notification will include the reason for the decision and advise the customer of their appeal rights.

14. THE RIGHT TO APPEAL

If the customer is not satisfied with the decision in respect of an application for an Exceptional Hardship Fund award, a decision to reduce the amount of Exceptional Hardship Fund awarded, a decision not to backdate an Exceptional Hardship Fund award or a decision that there has been an overpayment of an Exceptional Hardship Fund award, they must make written representation to the Council setting out their grounds of appeal.

Plymouth City Council will consider the appeal and respond in writing within 2 months of the date of the notification of the original decision, setting out the decision and associated reasons.

If the Council has not replied within 4 months, the customer can appeal to the Valuation Tribunal Service (VTS). Or, if the customer disagrees with the Council's decision, they will have 2 months to appeal to the VTS.

15. FRAUD

The Customer Service Department is committed to protect public funds and ensure funds are awarded to the people who are rightfully eligible to them.

A customer who tries to fraudulently claim an Exceptional Hardship Fund award 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 Theft Act 1968.

Where the Customer Service Department suspects that such a fraud may have been committed, this matter will be investigated as appropriate and may lead to criminal proceedings being instigated.

16. LEGISLATION

The Local Government Finance Act 2012 amends Section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and sets out the requirement for Councils to develop and adopt a localised Council Tax Support Scheme. This Exceptional Hardship Fund Policy forms part of this Scheme.

17. COMPLAINTS

Complaints can be made on the Councils website and the Council policy for complaints will be applied in the event of any complaint received about this policy.

18. POLICY REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed at least every 3 years and updated as appropriate to ensure it remains fit for purpose. However, the review may take place sooner should there be any significant changes in legislation or to the Council Tax Support scheme.