



Local Government Resource Review: Proposals for Business Rates Retention

A Plain English Guide

What are we changing and why?

- At the moment, local councils receive their funding from three main sources: grants from central government; council tax; and other locally generated income (such as fees and charges for services). Britain's local government finance system is one of the most centralised in the world and our councils get more than half of their income from central government grant.
- Central government grants can be received as 'specific grants', which can come with restrictions on what they can be spent on, or through 'formula grant', which has no restrictions and can be used by the authority for any purpose. The formula grant funds a wide range of local services, including children's services, adult social services, police, fire, and highways maintenance, and is distributed to all local authorities using a complex formula.
- One of the main components of formula grant is National Non-Domestic Rates, commonly known as business rates. Business rates are collected by local authorities from businesses in their areas like shops, offices, warehouses and factories, but they are currently paid into a central pool to be redistributed as part of formula grant.
- This system means that local authorities do not have any financial incentive to promote business growth in their area, as they will not receive any of the business rates receipts from new development.
- This dependence on central government funding also means there is a greater incentive to design services in order to secure government funding, rather than to respond to local communities' needs or align spending with citizens' service preferences; councils may feel they can generate better results for their area by lobbying government for more resources or demonstrating their need, rather than driving cost efficiencies or investing in local growth.
- The Government wants to change the current system by enabling councils to keep a share of the growth in business rates in their area. This will make councils more financially independent from central government and give them a strong incentive to promote local business growth.

- We are not proposing to make any changes to the way businesses pay tax or the way the tax is set. Rate setting powers will remain under the control of central government.
- Councils can already raise additional revenues from the rating system through a Business Rate Supplement in order to fund a specific project which promotes economic development, or they can encourage Business Improvement Districts to form – where businesses themselves agree to pay an additional amount to fund improvements in the area. In both these examples there are protections for businesses. There must be a referendum of local businesses before a Business Improvement District forms and the Localism Bill is changing the law so that the same applies for any Business Rate Supplement proposal, rather than a ballot of businesses happening only when certain criteria are met. The Localism Bill is also amending the law to allow councils to introduce local business rates discounts, funded by the council.
- There will be no changes to the existing reliefs available to eligible business ratepayers including small businesses, charities, rural businesses, sports clubs and the voluntary sector.

Our proposals for change

- If we allowed all councils to keep all of the business rates generated in their areas, some areas would have a much larger amount than they need to deliver their services whilst some others would have much less than they need.
- So, to ensure a fair starting position for the new system, we will take an amount of business rates away from those with too large an amount in comparison to their current spending (this is referred to as the “tariff” in the consultation document) and top up those authorities with too little, again in comparison to their current spending (this is referred to as the “top up” in the consultation document).
- In future years the amount of business rates that central government gives or takes from each local authority will remain fixed. This means that any growth in business rates an authority achieves will be kept by them. This creates a strong incentive effect to promote growth.
- There would be no fixed limit on the amount of business rates growth an authority can benefit from under the new system. The more any authority grows its business rates base, the better off it will become.
- However, some local authorities with large amounts of business property in their area and may stand to gain disproportionate amounts. Where this happens, we are proposing to take back a share of their growth (this is referred to as the “levy” in the consultation document).
- We are proposing to use the proceeds of this to give financial help to those authorities who experience significant drops in business rates, for example caused by the closure or relocation of a major business. We are also proposing to protect those authorities who are less able to grow. Depending on the amounts raised, the proceeds could also be redistributed to authorities with lower growth, or fund schemes, for example, for regeneration, in areas with high growth potential.

- In the future, the Government may judge that the level of a number of councils' business rates no longer meet changing pressures on local services. In this situation, we could choose to 'reset' the fixed amounts of business rates that were either taken from councils with too high levels of business rates or given to those with too low levels. This would probably involve a new assessment of local authorities' need.
- The whole system could also work for groups of councils working together, for example those in local enterprise partnerships or districts and counties, who want to form voluntary groups, allowing them to collaborate to promote growth and share in the benefits.

What do these proposals mean in practice?

- **Members of the general public** will find their local council's budget is more strongly linked to local business growth. In general terms, the more new business premises are developed in your area, the more funding (outside of council tax, fees and charges) your local council will have to provide local services and investment, as well as having positive impacts on employment and the local economy more widely. The proposals include protections to ensure that local authorities are able to meet local service needs in their area.
- **Business rates payers** see no change in the way in which their business rates bills are calculated. The Government is not proposing to change the way that properties are valued or business rates levels are set. However, it should mean that the rates you pay have more impact on local authority budgets in your local area, and that your local authority has more incentive to work closely with the Valuation Office Agency to ensure that all businesses in your area have their properties valued correctly and are paying the right amount of tax.
- **Developers** will find local authorities have greater incentives to grant planning permissions for appropriately-sited and well-planned non-residential development and go for growth. This is especially true of new renewable energy projects that start paying business rates from year one of the system, as councils would keep all of the business rates paid by such projects. Local authorities would also be able to choose to borrow against future growth in business rates, through Tax Increment Financing schemes, to help fund the provision of infrastructure.
- **Billing authorities** (district councils, unitary authorities) still bill and collect business rates, as now. But instead of contributing all business rates into the central pool and receiving formula grant, under these proposals, some of your business rates would be retained locally. Your baseline level of funding would be set so that at the start of the system, your budget is equivalent to what it would have been under the current system. From then on your funding would grow if the business rates base in your area grows, but could fall if your business rate base declines. You are likely to want to respond to the consultation, and/or feed into wider responses from representative organisations.
- **County councils** will receive a share of business rates revenues from the districts in your area (and a top up from other areas if relevant), rather than receiving formula grant. Your baseline level of funding would be set so that at the start of the system your budget is equivalent to what it would have been under the current system. From

then on, your funding would grow if the business rates base in your area grows, but could fall if your business rates base declines. You will want to consider with your districts, and possibly neighbouring areas/your local enterprise partnership, whether you could form a pool to make decisions about the distribution of funding locally. You are likely to want to respond to the consultation, and/or feed into wider responses from representative organisations.

- **The police and fire sectors** will receive the level of funding for 2013-14 and 2014-15 that was agreed as part of the 2010 Spending Review. Your funding will therefore not be affected by fluctuations in business rates in your area. The way in which you are funded will be fully reviewed in time for changes to be made at the next Spending Review, from 2015-16. You might want to respond to this consultation.

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