

Local authority flights

Duncan Simpson

June 2018



Introduction

While local authorities have seen a reduction in central government grants since 2010, council tax has risen by 57 per cent in real terms over the last 20 years in England.¹

A small minority of councils require the regular use of aircraft for council business, such as the Shetland, Orkney and Western Isles. Additionally, unitary authorities in England and Wales that have different responsibilities, such as child protection, may have to undertake foreign travel as part of this.

There is however no justification for councils flying in business or first class.

Key findings

Between 1 January 2015 and February 2018:

- At least **£6,792,500** was spent by English, Welsh and Scottish local authorities on flights. On average, each local authority spent **£29,152** on flights.
- The local authority that spent the most on flights in the UK was **Orkney Islands Council**, with **£899,552**. The local authority in the mainland UK that spent the most on flights was **Manchester City Council**, with **£199,977**.
- At least **5,393.5 non-domestic return flights** were taken by **182** local authorities.
- **144** return flights were taken in non-economy cabins, such as premium economy and business class. **18** local authorities took business class flights and **17** took premium economy flights.

On a regional basis, these are the highest-spending councils:

Region	Local authority	Total spend (£)
East of England	Norfolk County Council	119,975
East Midlands	Northamptonshire County Council	49,053
London	London Borough of Brent	48,271
North East	Sunderland City Council	128,080
North West	Manchester City Council	199,977
Scotland	Orkney Islands Council	899,552
South East	Kent County Council	22,971
South West	Council of the Isles of Scilly	459,670
Wales	Cardiff City Council	173,975
West Midlands	Coventry City Council	82,152
Yorkshire and the Humber	Sheffield City Council	63,398

¹ Zeber, J., *20 Years of Council Tax*, TaxPayers' Alliance, 15 January 2018, https://www.taxpayersalliance.com/20_years_of_council_tax, (accessed 4 May 2018).

Which council took the most international flights?

- The local authority that took the most **non-domestic flights** was **Manchester City Council** – 475 return flights.
- The local authority that took the most **European flights** was **Cardiff City Council** – 426 return flights. This may have included entries for schools, but it was not clear from the data.
- The local authority that took the most **non-European international flights** was **Sheffield City Council** – 52 return flights and a one-way journey.

Premium class flights

- The local authority that took the most **business class flights** was **Essex County Council**, with 13 return flights. They spent **£8,173** on business class flights.
- The local authority that took the most **premium economy flights** was **Cardiff City Council**, with 27 return flights. They spent **£15,762** on premium economy flights.

How much council tax paid for flights?

- In England, the average council tax between 2015 and 2018 was £1,534.72.² English councils spent at least **£2,930,450** on flights in this period, or an annual average of **£976,817**. This is the equivalent of **1,909** council tax bills over three years.
- In Scotland, the average council tax between 2015 and 2018 was £1,145.51.³ Scottish councils spent at least **£3,588,061** on flights in this period, or an annual average of **£1,196,020**. This is the equivalent of **3,132** council tax bills over three years.
- In Wales, the average council tax between 2015 and 2018 was £1397.93.⁴ Welsh councils spent at least **£273,988** on flights in this period, or an annual average of **£91,329**. This is the equivalent of **196** council tax bills over three years.

² Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Table 1: calculating Council Tax levels, England summary 2014-15 to 2018-19*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/council-tax-levels-set-by-local-authorities-in-england-2018-to-2019>, (accessed 26 April 2018).

³ Scottish Government, *Council Tax by Band 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18*, 16 April 2018, <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Local-Government-Finance/DatasetsCouncilTax/CTBand1819>, (accessed 26 April 2018).

⁴ Stats Wales, *Average band D council tax, by billing authority*, March 2018, <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Local-Government/Finance/Council-Tax/Levels/averagebanddcounciltax-by-billingauthority>, (accessed 26 April 2018).

Expensive and peculiar flights:

- **Manchester City Council** has two entries for **£12,002** for flights to **Hong Kong** with Cathay Pacific in October 2015. It is unclear whether these two entries are group bookings, or what class of cabin they are in. However, a fully-flexible first class ticket retailed for £13,000-14,000 on the same route in April 2018.
- **Liverpool City Council** took flights to Kabul, Somaliland, Basra, and Liberia.
- **Sunderland City Council** spent **£26,584** on six **business class** flights to Tokyo.
- **Northamptonshire County Council** spent **£9,326** on six flights to Montego Bay, Jamaica. Three of the twelve legs of the return journey were in **premium economy**.

[Click here to see how much your council spent on flights](#)

Sources and methodology

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Council Tax levels set by local authorities in England in 2018 to 2019 (revised)*, 2018.

Scottish Government, *Council Tax by Band 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18*, 2018.

Stats Wales, *Average band D council tax, by billing authority*, 2018.

Zeber, J., *20 Years of Council Tax*, TaxPayers' Alliance, 2018.

- A Freedom of Information (FOI) request was sent out to all 407 local authorities in the United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland). It asked for the total amount that the local authorities had paid for flights between 1 January 2015 and February 2018. Also included were any arms-length management organisation organisations or arms-length bodies owned by the local authority.
- The following was asked for in the FOI request:
 - The name of the airline used
 - The fare paid
 - The class of ticket (eg. economy, premium economy, business, first)
 - The date
 - The port of departure
 - The port of arrival
- The total number of non-domestic flights (5,393.5) is for return journeys. In the attached spreadsheet an entry for 0.5 flights is therefore a one-way journey.
- In total, 348 local authorities gave a response to the FOI. Of these, 233 had paid for flights, or 57 per cent of the UK's local authorities.
- Where possible, spending by local authorities in Scotland and Wales on flights for schools has been excluded. However, not all councils made it clear who the purchaser of the flights was, and so some entries for Scotland and Wales will include spending by schools.
- Only spending on flights by local authorities and their subsidiaries has been included. For instance, many unitary authorities in England and Wales, and City Councils in Scotland, had journeys paid for by the European Union. Where the cost of a ticket has been split, but the ratio between funders has not been stated, it is assumed that the local authority has paid for half of the fare.
- All figures for flights are in cash terms. Any FOI responses received after 5 June 2018 were not included in the dataset.
- The total number of non-domestic flights is likely to be an underestimate. This is because some councils did not distinguish between group bookings and individual bookings. Where a group booking is assumed, but is not made clear, this has been counted as one entry for a non-domestic flight.