

Key guide

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Pensions tax planning for high earners



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Introduction

Mitigating a high tax bill

Despite government ambitions to reduce income tax rates, the overall tax burden is likely to remain at an historically high level for the foreseeable future. Higher earners are continuing to shoulder most of the burden. Those higher and additional rate taxpayers currently pay over two thirds of all income tax.¹

One in six income tax payers are currently taxed at the higher or additional rate.² The proportion will increase significantly following the freezing of tax allowances and bands until April 2028, despite recent sharp increases to inflation with no guarantees beyond that.³ The threshold for paying additional rate tax reduced in tax year 2023/24 from £150,000 to £125,140.⁴ The threshold for phasing out the personal allowance has been unchanged since it came into force in April 2010.⁵

Please note that all examples included in this guide are fictitious.



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¹ Table 2.6 Income tax liabilities, by income source, tax band and marginal rate, gov.uk 2023

² Table 2.1 Number of individual Income Tax payers by marginal rate, sex and age, gov.uk 2023

³ HM Treasury Autumn Statement, November 2022

⁴ Spring Budget Report, Progeny 2023

⁵ The Effect of Personal Allowance Withdrawal on Personal Pension Contributions, TARC 2017

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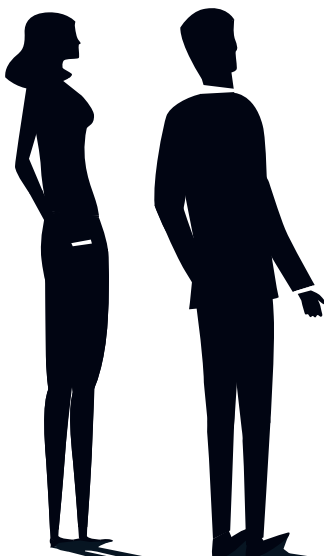
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The rising tax burden on income

The point at which you start to pay 40% income tax is £50,271 for 2023/24.⁶ In Scotland, the 42% rate kicks in at £43,663 income, having increased at less than the rate of inflation over the past ten years.⁷

The UK government has announced that thresholds will not rise again before tax year 2028/29, bringing over 1.5 million more people into higher rate tax.⁸ You may also be feeling the impact of the tax on child benefit, which applies to those with income over a £50,000 threshold (frozen since January 2013), or you may be subject to tax on dividends.⁹ Planning could help you to lessen the rising tax burden – and we're here to help.

This guide explores a key tax planning opportunity: making pension contributions. Pension contributions qualify for tax relief based on your highest rate, which means the rate of relief can currently be 20%, 40% or 45% (20%, 21%, 42% or 47% in Scotland).¹⁰ The effective rate of relief could be up to 60% (63% in Scotland), or even higher, if your pension contributions help you to avoid the withdrawal of child benefit or your personal allowance.



Income tax thresholds have not kept pace with inflation and are now frozen, which means high earners should be aware of the tax-planning opportunities open to them.

Pensions – less tax now, more income later

The tax reliefs successive governments have given to pension arrangements mean that they have long played an important role in tax planning for high earners. This was limited from April 2011 by increasingly tight restrictions on these reliefs, but in the 2023 Spring Budget the Government announced increases to the maximum you can pay into a pension each year and the scrapping of heavy tax charges when withdrawals exceed a lifetime allowance.¹¹

The use of pensions in income tax planning is often divided into two areas: pre-retirement and at-retirement. However, there is no direct link between physical retirement (stopping work) and drawing on a pension arrangement. You may draw benefits before retirement and make pension contributions after your working life has ended. In practice, it is possible to consider three phases:

- **Before age 55*** you can pay into a pension but cannot take anything out unless you are in serious ill health.
- **Between age 55 and 74** you can pay in or draw out (or do both at once), which gives you real flexibility to manage your income as you move into retirement.
- **From age 75** you can no longer receive tax relief on pension contributions, but you have a free choice of how much or how little you draw out each year.¹²

*** Normal minimum pension age (NMPA) due to increase from 55 to 57 from 6 April 2028**

⁶ HM Treasury Autumn Statement, November 2022

⁷ Income Tax Policy Proposal: Scottish Budget 2023-24

⁸ Autumn Statement 2022 response, IFS.org.uk

⁹ High income child benefit data, gov.uk 2023

¹⁰ Income Tax Policy Proposal: Scottish Budget 2023-24

¹¹ Abolition of Lifetime Allowance and increases to Pension Tax Limits, gov.uk 2023

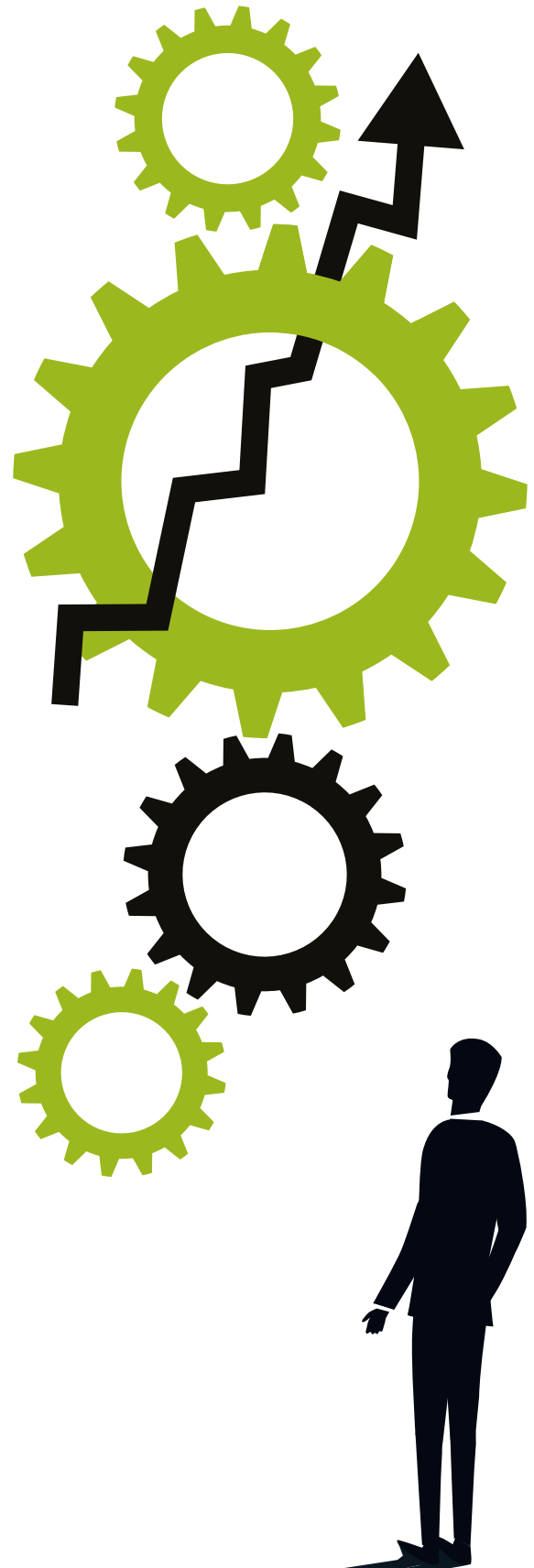
¹² HMRC Pensions Tax Manual, 2022

Pensions can also play an important role in combatting another tax that may concern you and your family: inheritance tax (IHT). The table below summarises the key tax benefits.

<p>When contributions are made</p>	<p>Within the annual allowance, individual contributions up to the level of your earnings qualify for income tax relief, and employer contributions normally reduce taxable profits.</p>
<p>When the pension fund is invested</p>	<p>The scheme pays no UK tax on investment income or capital gains, although dividend income may have effectively been subject to corporation tax for the company paying it and this cannot be reclaimed.¹³</p>
<p>When you take your pension benefits</p>	<p>Within the lifetime allowance, a quarter of the value is normally available as a tax-free lump sum. Income is taxable, but possibly at a lower rate than when you were working.</p>
<p>When you die</p>	<p>If you die before age 75, payments made from your pension fund (as lump sums or income) are normally IHT and income tax free. This applies whether or not you have started drawing income. However, any excess over £1,073,100 will be taxed as income on the recipient if it is taken as a lump sum and you have not yet started to take benefits from it. On death at or after age 75, income tax will apply to benefits.</p>

¹³ Pension tax considerations, Aegon 2023

Income tax thresholds have not kept pace with inflation and are now frozen, which means high earners should be aware of the tax-planning opportunities open to them.



Contribution planning

Your personal contributions to a pension normally qualify for income tax relief at your marginal rate(s). Most commonly, individuals pay 80% of their contribution and the pension scheme claims the remaining 20% from the government.

These rates apply across the UK, so income taxed at the 19% starter rate in Scotland gets 20% tax relief. If your highest rate of tax is over 20%, you can claim the balance under income tax self-assessment.

Pension contributions reduce the income that is taken into account in the phasing out of the personal allowance where income exceeds £100,000, so they can potentially help you avoid an effective tax rate of up to 60% (63% in Scotland) on part of your income. Contributions can also help you to sidestep the additional rate tax band, which starts at £125,140 of taxable income, or the high-income child benefit tax charge, which affects those with income over £50,000.



Example – pensions tax relief

Esther, who lives in England, has total income of £112,000 for the tax year 2023/24. Her personal allowance is reduced by £1 for every £2 of income over £100,000, meaning she loses £6,000 from her personal allowance.

As a higher rate (40%) taxpayer, she pays £2,400 on this extra taxable income. If she makes a pension contribution of £12,000 including the tax relief, this reduces her relevant income and she recovers her full annual allowance. In addition, she gets the full 40% tax relief on the contribution, amounting to £4,800. This means that the £12,000 contribution only costs her £4,800 (£12,000 – £2,400 – £4,800). This is equivalent to tax relief of 60%.

Pension contributions can offer a particularly effective way to reduce your tax bill whilst also helping you to prepare for retirement so you should make sure you are aware of all the options.

The rules on limits for tax relief are complicated. Total contributions, including deemed contributions to an employer's defined benefit scheme (e.g. a scheme that provides a pension based on your length of service and salary) must be kept within an annual allowance to avoid tax charges. This annual allowance is currently £60,000, but it reduces for those with 'adjusted income' over £260,000 and it is just £10,000 for adjusted incomes of £360,000 and over. 'Adjusted income' includes pension contributions paid by an employer or deducted from your pre-tax pay in addition to normal taxable income.

The annual allowance rules mean that for some people, for example consultants and other high-earning NHS staff, working extra hours can lead to high tax bills because of additional pension accrual in a defined benefits scheme. The likelihood has been reduced, but not eliminated, by increases to the allowance from tax year 2023/24. Professional advice is essential in these circumstances.

Regardless of your earnings, the maximum contribution to your pensions (excluding any defined benefit schemes) without tax charges falls to just £10,000 once you have started to receive payments from your pensions flexibly. Some exceptions to this rule apply, for instance if you take a tax-free lump sum and buy certain types of lifetime annuity with the remaining fund.

Carry forward

There are some special rules that may allow you to catch up on the pension contributions you could have made in the previous three tax years. In 2023/24, you can utilise your unused annual allowance dating back to 2020/21. This is known as 'carry forward'. The rules are relatively complicated, but, in theory at least, if your earnings are high enough and you have not paid into a pension in recent years, it would be possible to make up to £180,000 of pension contributions in 2023/24 with full tax relief. This facility may be particularly helpful for those who had to reduce pension contributions during the Covid-19 crisis or because income was squeezed by inflation.

If this type of planning could be relevant to you, then please seek our professional advice. Both the calculation of unused relief and the identification of contributions to tax years are often not straightforward.

Tax treatment varies according to individual circumstances and is subject to change.

Example – Carry forward

Elaine has paid £20,000 into her pension in the 'input periods' for each of the three tax years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23, when the annual allowance was £40,000.

She can carry forward £20,000 (£40,000 – £20,000) from each of these years – a total of £60,000. She can add in £60,000 for the tax year 2023/24 and contribute up to £120,000 in that year, assuming she has sufficient earnings to qualify for tax relief on the whole amount and that her adjusted income is not over £260,000.

Salary sacrifice

Whether or not you wish to maximise your pension contributions, it is well worth spending some time on the payment arrangements. If you are an employee, then you (and your employer) can save national insurance contributions (NICs). You can reduce your salary or your bonus and ask your employer to use the money, including the NIC saving, to make the pension contributions for you. The technical name for this is salary or bonus sacrifice. If you pay higher or additional rate income tax, the result could be an increase of around 18% in the amount being paid into your pension.

Importantly, your cash salary will be reduced and replaced with the pension benefit. Before adopting this pension contribution route, you should consider the effect this may have on:

- your ability to borrow money, e.g. for a mortgage;
- your entitlement to redundancy payments or other benefits, such as statutory maternity pay, working tax credit or child tax credit;
- any life insurance or income protection where the amount paid is linked to your salary.



Taking control of your pension plan – SIPP's

Pension schemes and providers generally offer a wide range of investment funds, which meet the needs of most people.

However, if you have already saved a substantial amount, a self-invested personal pension (SIPP) offers you the opportunity to take control of your pension investments.

A SIPP gives you a much wider choice of investments to suit your priorities and preferences, and if you have your own business you may be able to use your pension to help develop it tax-efficiently. For example, you can hold commercial property and company shares in a SIPP, or you can build up a portfolio of investments.

A SIPP also offers a flexible and tax-efficient way to turn the pension fund you have accumulated into an income for your retirement. There are, however, downsides to SIPP's which will be touched upon later.

What is a SIPP?

A SIPP is a special form of personal pension that allows you, as the pension scheme member, to choose and control the investments within your pension plan. SIPP's are offered by most of the major providers, including investment platforms, insurance companies and specialist pension firms.

The benefits that you can draw from a SIPP and the contributions that can be made are subject to the same rules as any personal pension. The key differentiator is the range of investments available. These vary among providers, with insurance companies typically offering a more limited range that will suit most investors, while specialist providers may offer the full range. Typically, investment options include:

- a very wide range of investment funds;
- direct investment in stocks and shares;
- cash deposits;
- commercial property.

Whilst SIPP's allow a large range of investments, some options may not be appropriate for you, such as direct investment in overseas property or derivatives.



If you want more control over how your pension funds are invested, you may want to consider a SIPP, which allows you to choose how your savings are used.

SIPP as part of your investment portfolio

Most SIPPs include funds and quoted investments, which you may hold alongside your other assets. It is important that your investments are integrated as far as possible and considered together in your financial planning.

A key consideration is ensuring that your investment portfolio balances risk and reward in a way you are comfortable with. This will take account of the time horizon of your investments as well as your personal attitude. This will largely be reflected in asset allocation, which is simply the balance between secure but low-growth investments, such as cash deposits, and more risky but higher-potential investments, such as company shares. You will also need to consider the selection of investment funds/index trackers, which are likely to make up a large part of your portfolio, and ensure they are suitably diversified and reviewed regularly.

The taxation of investments can also help determine whether they are held inside your SIPP or elsewhere in your investment portfolio, with dividends over the allowance of £1,000 a year subject to tax (this reduces to £500 from April 2024).¹⁴

Consolidating your pensions in a SIPP

Many people build up several different pensions over the years. Some pension funds may still be with former employers, while others are those we have saved ourselves. Some may have high charges and under-performing investments. Consolidating old pensions into a SIPP can potentially reduce charges and allow investments to be made that better meet your needs.

This must be done with caution. Some employer schemes have very low charges, so you could pay more after switching to a SIPP and you will need to be confident this is justified by the additional investment flexibility. Even more importantly, you must be careful about giving up guarantees in your old pension arrangements. Some older arrangements, which are usually on a 'with profits' basis, guarantee the terms on which you can convert your pension fund into an income through an annuity. Guaranteed annuity rates can give you a pension that could be twice as high as buying the best annuity available on standard rates today, but this may be subject to restrictive terms.

Commercial property investment

A major attraction of SIPPs is that certain types can invest in commercial property.

Commercial property can be let to the pension scheme member's company or partnership. You can even sell a property that you or your business owns to the pension scheme (although this might result in a tax charge on any capital gains). Any sale transaction must use an arm's length valuation because there

are tax penalties for 'value shifting', for example undervalued sales to your pension scheme. Similarly, the business must always pay a full commercial rent, which the SIPP will receive tax free.

A SIPP can borrow up to 50% of its net assets for property investment (or any other purpose). Often SIPP property purchase is financed by a combination of transfers from previous pension arrangements, new contributions and borrowing.

Example – SIPP borrowing

Oscar has a SIPP with total assets of £300,000 and a personal pension valued at £100,000. He decides to transfer the personal pension into the SIPP and can then borrow £200,000 (50% of £400,000) and spend up to £600,000 on a commercial property.

SIPPs that hold commercial property as an investment normally have higher annual charges than simpler pension arrangements with investments in listed securities, collective funds and cash.

Specialised investments and taxable investments

In theory, almost any investment can be held in a SIPP, but those that are not approved by HMRC are subject to heavy tax charges that make them unattractive. They are known as 'taxable property' and include, for example, residential property, works of art, antiques, fine wine and other collectibles.

The maximum tax charge on taxable property is 104% of the investment's value, most of which falls on the member.¹⁵ Some indirect investment in property and chattels is exempt from the tax penalty, but the definitions are strictly drawn.

The way in which the legislation operates will potentially catch a controlling director's pension scheme investing in the shares of their own unlisted company. While there is a limited exemption for indirect investment in chattels with a market value of no more than £6,000, many providers ban investment in chattels and member-related unlisted securities.¹⁶ However, some SIPPs do permit investment in suitably structured residential property funds.

The Alternative Investment Market (AIM) invests in assets that are high risk and can be difficult to sell such as shares in unlisted companies. The value of the investment and the income from it can fall as well as rise and investors may not get back what they originally invested, even taking into account the tax benefits.

¹⁴ Income Tax: Reducing the Dividend Allowance, gov.uk 2023

¹⁵ HMRC Pensions tax manual, 2022

¹⁶ Chattels and Capital Gains Tax 2021

Withdrawing money from your pension

Pension rules accommodate a number of different options once you reach the minimum pension age of 55 (which increases to 57 in 2028).

There are no restrictions on how much income you can take each year from drawdown, and you can take 25% of your pension funds as a tax-free lump sum at the start, with subsequent withdrawals taxed as income. The best way to structure withdrawals from your pension will depend on your personal circumstances.¹⁷

With the cost-of-living crisis putting many people under financial strain, it might be tempting to start or increase pension withdrawals. However, withdrawals made now could significantly reduce income available in the future. Careful consideration is needed of what level of withdrawal may be appropriate, and what investments should be encashed to provide it. It may be a good time to review your pension investments to ensure they are appropriately diversified. You also need to be aware that starting to withdraw income flexibly restricts future pension contributions to a maximum of £10,000 a year before suffering tax charges. Professional advice is essential to avoid potential pitfalls.

¹⁷ Increasing the normal minimum pension age: consultation response, 2021

Example – Drawing from pension

Samira has a SIPP with a value of £600,000.

After taking financial advice, she decides to 'crystallise' £400,000 by moving £300,000 to drawdown and taking £100,000 as a lump sum. The £100,000 is tax-free as it is a quarter of the £400,000 total withdrawal. She decides to keep the remaining £200,000 'uncrystallised' until she needs it, when she can take 25% tax-free.



How we can help

Retirement planning is complex, and has been made even more so by constant changes to the rules. We make it our business to stay up to date with the latest developments, and to help clients take full advantage of the available tax breaks. In particular, we can give guidance on:

- Assessing your financial priorities and recommending a tailored retirement planning strategy.
- Maximising pension contributions, using carry forward where appropriate.
- Advising whether salary sacrifice could increase the amount invested in your pension at no extra cost to you or your employer.
- The appropriateness of a SIPP, and the right investment strategy.
- Transferring existing pension arrangements into your new pension arrangement.
- Managing the move from saving to withdrawing from your pension.
- Minimising IHT liabilities after your death.





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