

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET – TUESDAY, 5 MARCH 2019

Title of report	FORMER TENANT RENT ARREARS, CURRENT TENANT RENT ARREARS, COUNCIL TAX, NON DOMESTIC RATES AND SUNDRY DEBTOR WRITE OFFS
Key Decision	a) Financial No b) Community No
Contacts	<p>Councillor Nick Rushton 01530 412059 nicholas.rushton@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</p> <p>Strategic Director of Housing & Customer Services 01530 454819 glyn.jones@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</p> <p>Head of Customer Services 01530 454753 tom.shardlow@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</p> <p>Head of Finance 01530 454707 tracy.bingham@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</p>
Purpose of report	To agree write-offs over £10,000 and receive details of debts written off under delegated powers.
Reason for decision	To comply with proper accounting practices.
Council priorities	Value for Money
Implications:	
Financial/Staff	There is no additional financial effect as all the debts are met from the Authority's bad debt provision for previous years arrears or from in year income if the debts relate to the current financial year.
Risk Management	Regular reviews of debts for write off mitigates the risk that the Council's accounts do not reflect the true level of recoverable income. It is also part of an effective arrears management strategy.
Equalities Impact Screening	Not applicable.
Human Rights	None discernible.

Transformational Government	Not applicable.
Comments of Head of Paid Service	The report is satisfactory.
Comments of Section 151 Officer	The report is satisfactory.
Comments of Monitoring Officer	The report is satisfactory.
Consultees	None.
Background papers	All papers used in compiling the report contain exempt information under paragraph 3 of Part 1 to Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972
Recommendations	THAT CABINET APPROVES THE NON DOMESTIC RATES AND SUNDRY DEBT WRITE OFFS THAT ARE OVER £10,000 AND NOTES THE AMOUNTS WRITTEN OFF UNDER DELEGATED POWERS.

1.0 WRITE OFFS

1.1 Write offs relating to prior years against Bad Debt Provision:

	Provision as at 1 April 2018	Write offs to date (under delegated powers)	Amounts written off over £10,000 approved by Members	Balance Available
Council Tax	£2,171,722.74	£134,450.21	£0.00	£2,037,272.53
Non Domestic Rates	£273,111.56	£26,662.62	£17,274.00	£229,174.94
Housing Rents	£582,403.98	£22,650.38	£0.00	£559,753.60
Sundry Debtors/Housing Benefit Overpayments	£1,638,123.39	£26,640.75	£0.00	£1,611,482.64

1.2 Write offs relating to 2018/19

	Write offs to date (under delegated powers)	Amounts written off over £10,000 approved by Members
Council Tax	£10,640.34	£0.00
Non Domestic Rates	£7,906.15	£302,623.50
Housing Rents	£11,359.67	£0.00
Sundry Debtors/Housing Benefit Overpayments	£546.31	£0.00

2.0 FORMER TENANT RENT ARREARS

- 2.1 There are no former tenancy write-offs written off under delegated powers./
- 2.2 There are no former tenancy arrears write-offs over £10,000 for which we seek approval.

3.0 CURRENT TENANT RENT ARREARS

- 3.1 The amounts written off under delegated powers, in accordance with the policy, are as follows: eleven cases under £1,000 which amount to £4,965.19. Of these four cases are deceased with no estate (£1,965.72) and seven are uneconomical to pursue (£2,999.47). There are three cases between £1,000 and £10,000 amounting to £5,291.98. Of these, one is deceased with no estate (£2,863.86), and two are uneconomical to pursue (£2,428.12).

4.0 COUNCIL TAX

- 4.1 There are currently no council tax debts over £10,000 for which Cabinet's approval for write off is sought.
- 4.2 The amounts written off under delegated powers, in accordance with the thresholds outlined in the write off policy, are as follows: Six cases under £100 which amount to £202.22. Of these, one case has absconded (£76.31), two cases are uneconomical to collect (£44.12), one case is deceased with no assets (£10.31) and two cases are insolvent (£71.48). There are 47 cases between £100 and £1,000, which amount to £19,053.39. Of these, 23 have absconded (£11,634.46), eight cases are insolvent (£4,246.61), two are deceased with no assets (£643.20) and one is statute barred (£354.09). There are 31 cases between £1,000 and £10,000 which amount to £57,911.59. Of these, 12 cases are insolvent (£28,109.62), one case has a debt relief order (£1,021.58), 15 have absconded (£23,239.08) and three are due to severe hardship (£5,541.31).

4.3 The full list of reasons for writing off debt includes:

- Bankruptcy or a Debt Relief Order is in place
- Deceased – No assets in the estate.
- Debtor Absconded / No Trace
- Company in liquidation/dissolved or ceased trading with no assets
- Severe Hardship and/or Serious health Issues
- Statute barred i.e. we cannot legally pursue the debt as there has been six years since the debt fell due and no action has been taken to collect the debt.
- Uneconomical to collect i.e. it is not financially viable to take further action for recovery e.g. due to the low level of the debt, they have gone abroad etc.

4.4 Writing off debts is only considered where all appropriate recovery and enforcement measures have been taken, or where the council is legally prohibited from pursuing the debt.

4.5 Each year the council produces a recovery timetable which details the dates on which the Statutory Reminders, Final Notices and Summonses are to be despatched. The letters issued are designed to maximise collection by prompting tax payers to pay their missed instalments in a timely manner, thereby avoiding further enforcement action taking place. Information is provided on the website to explain what happens next should payment not be made.

4.6 For all outstanding debt, the council takes the recovery action outlined in the bullet points below:

- If payment is not received by the instalment due date shown on the bill, a reminder notice is issued.
- If payment is received within seven days the tax payer may continue with their original instalment plan. If they default again within the year, then one further reminder notice is issued. If they do not pay, the following steps are taken.
- If payment is not received by the date on the reminder notice, a Court Summons is issued. The Summons advises them of the date and time that the Council will attend a Magistrates Court hearing to apply for the award of a Liability Order against them.
- Once a Liability Order is obtained, the Council has a number of enforcement options open to them in order to secure payment of the debt.

4.7 Liability Order Action

Once a Liability Order has been obtained each debt is looked at and a decision is made as to the most appropriate course of action to take from the list of available options below. It is only after all of these have been considered and/or pursued that the debt is put forward for write off.

1. Apply to the debtor's employer for an Attachment of Earnings.
2. Apply to the DWP for a deduction from the debtor's benefits.
3. Instruct an external enforcement company (bailiffs) to collect the debt on the council's behalf.
4. If the enforcement company are unsuccessful, the Council could commence committal proceedings against the debtor.

5. If the debtor owns their own home a Charging Order could be made against the property.
6. If the debt is over £5,000, bankruptcy proceedings could be commenced against the debtor.

When considering the final three options on the above list, the Council must always be mindful of the individual circumstances of the debtor and the financial impact on the Council of pursuing each option. Additional costs will be incurred when utilising any of these options.

5.0 NON DOMESTIC RATES (NNDR)

- 5.1 There is one Non Domestic Rate debt over £10,000 for which Cabinet approval is sought amounting to £17,754.36. The case has been considered by the section 151 officer and Discretionary Rates Relief has been awarded in line with the Council's criteria for Discretionary Rates Relief. The outstanding amount of £17,754.36 is recommended for write off since Discretionary Relief cannot be backdated.
- 5.2 The amounts written off under delegated powers in accordance with the policy thresholds are as follows: There are five cases between £1,000 and £10,000 amounting to £16,800.56. Of these, two cases are insolvent (£9,800.25), two cases have absconded (£5,934.86) and one case is outside our area of enforcement (1,065.45). There is one case between £100 and £1,000 amounting to £593.81 which is insolvent.
- 5.3 As with the recovery of Council Tax, for Business Rates, writing off debt is only ever considered as a last resort. Often companies, sole traders or partnerships become insolvent and the Council is prohibited from taking any further action as all of their outstanding debts are included within the Administration, Liquidation or personal bankruptcy.
- 5.4 The Council follows the same recovery process for Business Rates as for Council Tax. However, once the Council has obtained a Liability Order there are only a limited number of enforcement actions that can legally be pursued. In most cases, where a payment arrangement or contact cannot be made, the Council refers the case to external Enforcement Agents. If they are unsuccessful, the Council then has three further options to consider before putting the debt for write off. These options are:
 - Committal (For sole traders and partnerships only).
 - Security for Unpaid Rate (this is the equivalent of a Charging Order on a property but this can only be done with the ratepayers agreement).
 - Insolvency Proceedings.

6.0 SUNDRY DEBTORS (INCLUDES NON CURRENT HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS PRE 2011)

- 6.1 There are no sundry debtor cases over £10,000 for which Cabinet's approval for write off is sought.
- 6.2 There were no cases that have been written off under the Deputy S151 Officer delegated powers.
- 6.3 The recovery process varies dependant on the type of debt. Generally the debtor will receive a minimum of two reminder letters the final stating that recovery through the county court will take place in the event of non payment. Once judgement is obtained the normal recovery methods are available such as attachment of earnings / benefit etc.

7.0 CURRENT HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS

- 7.1 There are currently no housing benefit cases over £10,000 for which Cabinet's approval for write off is sought.
- 7.2 The amounts written off under delegated powers, in accordance with the thresholds outlined in the write off policy, are as follows: There are three cases under £100 amounting to £82.47. Two cases are uneconomical to collect (£0.47) and one case has a debt relief order (£82.00). There is one case between £100 and £1000 amounting to £245.14 where the amount is uneconomical to collect. There are two cases under £10,000 amounting to £9,296.69 which are insolvent.
- 7.3 For all outstanding benefit overpayment debt, the council takes the recovery action outlined in the bullet points below:
 - An invoice is issued giving 14 days to make payment, or to contact the council.
 - If payment is not received a first Reminder is issued, followed by a second reminder two to three weeks later.
 - If judgement is obtained in the County Court, the following enforcement options are available to consider:
 1. Warrants of Control (the use of County Court Bailiff, or High Court Sheriff)
 2. Third Party Debt Orders (Utilises the customer's bank account to extract payment)
 3. Charging Order (the debt is secured on the customer's house)
 4. Insolvency (petition for bankruptcy)