

MINUTES OF MANAGING ARREARS OF COUNCIL TAX TASK GROUP

21 JULY 2022

PRESENT:

Members of the Task Group: Councillors Brader, Mrs Brown, Roodhouse and Willis

Officers: Chryssa Burdett (Revenues Manager) and Linn Ashmore (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in Attendance: Michelle Giles (Client Solution Manager), Bristow and Sutor

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

RESOLVED THAT – Councillor Willis be appointed Chair of the task group for the duration of its work.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillor Ms Livesey.

3. SCENE SETTING FOR THE REVIEW

The Task Group received a brief update on the scene setting for the review from the Revenues Manager:

- Customers were always encouraged to contact the Council as early as possible if they are having difficulties paying their council tax.
- Council tax bills were issued at the beginning of March. Thirty five percent were issued by email and the remainder were sent by post. This is currently standing at 40%.
- 75% of customers have direct debit arrangements in place with varying plans. The options included annual, half yearly, monthly or weekly.
- Monthly direct debits are paid over either 10 or 12 instalments. There were options for payment dates including 1st, 12th, 19th or 26th day of the month. These allow customers to select a date nearest to when their income is received. Direct debits can also be paid on a weekly, fortnightly or four weekly basis.
- Legally, formal reminders must be sent in writing. Prior to this though an informal reminder is issued via text message. If there is no mobile telephone number available, an email is sent.
- Past evidence has shown that text messages were a more successful means of communication. The text gives a link to make a payment online.
- If payment is made there is no further contact.
- If payment is not made, another text or email will be sent, again prior to the second formal written reminder.

- The recovery process is published on the Council website. It is a legislative process that must be followed.
- In the past, information on support agencies was included with the written reminders but there were issues with people being unable to make appointments.
- The Revenue Team continue to encourage customers to contact the Council if they require advice or assistance. Officers will assist with making arrangements outside of the agreed instalment plan.
- Customers on low incomes are encouraged to apply for council tax support.

The Task Group were informed that there were a number of steps as part of the recovery process as outlined in the flow chart shared with Members. The most serious consequence to non-payment would be prison but the Council has not taken action to that stage for at least 15 years. The main aim was towards some form of payment arrangement.

During discussion the following points were raised:

Due to the amount of work being undertaken by the revenues team on energy rebates less recovery work has been carried out. Approximately 30 charging orders had been arranged. Some relate to multiple years debt for the same people.

This year 75% of council tax payments were made by direct debit. The overall current year collection rate was slightly down at 96.5% compared to the usual collection rate of 97%. This figure usually rises to 98.5% to including debt from subsequent years.

The collection rates compared favourably with the rest of the West Midlands and were in the middle of the county with the south being higher and the north slightly less.

The council tax bills were issued in March. The aim was to try and encourage people who may have difficulty paying to contact the Council as soon as possible. Many people enter into extend payment timescale schemes. More people are preferring to pay over 12 months.

In cases where the energy rebate had not been claimed, it was possible to put the money against the council tax due. To date 450 people had not yet claimed the energy rebate.

At the meeting held in April 2021, it was agreed that the following would be circulated to the Task Group:

- A copy of the recovery process flow chart – this has been shared with the task group.
- Average figures for how many cases are referred to the enforcement agents and how much was collected and returned to the Council.
- Statistics for the number of issues or complaints relating to the enforcement agents and a copy of the contract.
- Copies of the wording used in the text prompts and the reminder notices – this will be circulated to the task group.

4. ENFORCEMENT ACTION

The Task Group received a presentation from Bristow and Sutor on enforcement work and the recovery process. A copy of the presentation was subsequently circulated to the task group.

In addition to the presentation, and during subsequent discussion, the following points were raised:

- Bristow and Sutor were the only supplier to use WhatsApp as a means of contact.
- The use of Apple Pay resulted in a 13% increase in online payments.
- The length of a payment scheme would be set by the local authority.
- Only one complaint had been received since 2017 that resulted in being categorised as unfounded.
- During 2021-2022 only 1335 cases were referred to enforcement. This figure could include multiple years of debt and was not representative of individual cases.
- Write offs were a last resort and every effort was made to recover monies. The number is very small in comparison to the amount of council tax collected.

5. PROGRAMME OF WORK

It was agreed the purpose of the next meeting would be to gather evidence from the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Family Information Service (Warwickshire County Council).

The aim was to report to Scrutiny Committee in October. It was agreed some form protocol would be useful.

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Task Group agreed that the next meeting would be arranged by email for early September.

CHAIR