



## Debt Management Policy

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## 1. Introduction

Durham County Council (The Council) is financed through a combination of Government grants, retained Business Rates, Sundry Debts, Council Tax and Miscellaneous income. Residents and businesses have a responsibility to pay these charges to fund the statutory and non-statutory goods and services that the Local Authority provides to them.

While these revenue sources fund the services the Local Authority provides, there are general services provided direct to residents and customers which are individually chargeable.

The provision of care is also commissioned on behalf of service users in the county and Adult Social Care charges make up a substantial amount of Durham County Council Debt.

The below list of debts outlines some of the debt streams invoiced and billed by Durham County Council:

- Council Tax
- Business Rates
- Sundry Debts (General services)
- Sundry Debts (Adult Social Care)
- Collection on behalf of Durham Business Improvement District Levy
- Parking
- Housing Benefit Overpayment
- Commercial rents

When payments are received on these debts this is used as revenue income to fund day to day costs of running services. Many of these services provided are statutory and the Local Authority has a legal obligation to provide them.

To effectively manage debt, resources need to be focused on the unpaid Council debts that are reasonably considered to be collectable.

It is accepted that some Council debt is not recoverable (whether due to legal, ethical or practical limits) so to effectively manage the debt and the resource needed to ensure collection, the processes and procedures in this document are utilised. The Corporate Write Off Policy and Hardship policies ensure that the strategies for debt management laid out in this policy are implemented effectively and in a practical and monitored environment.

These policies are all contained within the same suite of documents so that Collectable debt can be effectively recovered, and appropriate action is taken.

If the charges remain uncollected, then the services provided by the Local Authority can face closure or be discontinued. The Local Authority needs to balance its books to maintain high level service provision.

Most residents pay in line with the bills or invoices issued to them. It is in the interests of these residents, the services that they use and the financial security of The Council that the Local Authority acts on its legal duty to collect any funds that go unpaid. When taking steps to recover debts The Council works to ensure that the processes involved are proportionate and fair.

Under the Debt Respite Scheme Regulations 2020 the Council is compelled to enter a moratorium of recovery action against an individual also known as Breathing Space. This prevents not only recovery but any contact with the customer in respect to any outstanding debts which has implications for the customer.

## **2. Key Aims**

Supporting billing, invoicing, and recovery processes by providing strategy and development plans for collecting outstanding debts and major sources of income, many of which are used to fund critical local services provided to the public.

This will be achieved by:

- Maximising financial performance while promoting ethical collection.
- Considering the sustainability of payment arrangements to pay over longer time scales if feasible.
- Promote and implement an effective and smart debt management culture.
- Supporting and proactively encouraging engagement from those in need via collaboration with stakeholders (e.g., Signposting customers to support where needed - internal and external).
- Considering new technologies and using lateral thinking to develop ways to enable us to identify customers in need and/or requiring support.

### **3. Billing and Invoicing**

Prompt, accurate and accessible billing via the appropriate format is important in reducing the burden of rising instalment amounts on customers, as well as ensuring the Authority debt levels and Collection Rates are reported accurately.

All bills/invoices will be in plain English clearly showing:

- What it is for
- Liability period (where relevant)
- Amount due and any subsequent instalment plan
- Payment methods
- Contact/web details for enquiries
- Any available entitlement to reliefs, exemptions, and discounts already awarded.

Where a debt changes for any reason other than payment, clear notification will be given of the amount due, any instalments and relevant contact details.

Quality assurance checks of amendments to accounts are carried out ensuring changes in circumstances and applications for exemptions, discounts, reductions, and reliefs are correctly calculated in accordance with legislation and policy.

All attempts will be made to eradicate delays and utilise technology to minimise avoidable contact.

A range of communication services are available to customers upon request, including:

- Translation and interpreting services if your first language is not English.
- Sign language interpreters and other support if you are deaf or have impaired hearing.
- Documents in alternative formats, for example Braille, large print, audio and disc.
- Other options tailored to meet specific individual needs.

For sundry debt (general charges) to minimise action required after the fact, payment should be obtained in advance of service provision where practicable.

Penalty Charge Notices (for example, parking fines) will include advice that any challenge must be made by the customer within 28 days of issue.

#### **4. Ways to Pay**

The council make it as accessible as possible for customers to pay their debts, and a variety of payment methods are offered. 'How to Pay' advice is on the reverse of all bills, recovery documents and invoices as well as on The Council website.

A variety of payment methods are available:

- Direct Debit.
- Debit/Credit card payments via the automated telephone payment line and online.
- Bank transfer direct to the Council's bank account.
- Barcode.
- PayPal is available to pay most bills.
- Cheque.
- Standing Order.
- BACS, CHAPS or Faster Payments to the Council's bank account.

Where feasible, Direct Debit will be promoted, as this is the most effective and efficient method of payment to administer. However, there are social and practical barriers to paying this way such as unpredictable working patterns and the inability to open a bank account.

To combat these barriers the Council not only offers many methods of payment but also signposting to various agencies/supportive measures who can assist with opening a bank account where appropriate.

#### **5. Ethical Collection of Debt**

The Council works to adopt a well-rounded approach when dealing with the collection of debts; considering circumstances, the priority/hierarchy of debts and any potential for hardship, but also recognises that engagement with customers earlier in the process is key to improving their journey and minimising costs.

Management and recovery of the Council's debt is handled smartly and while an engagement/welfare focused approach can impact cash collection, it ensures that a targeted approach to the management and

Collection of The Council's debt isn't at the expense of vulnerable and financially deprived individuals and communities within the county.

Priority is given to debts where non-payment could lead to loss of the customer's home, liberty or have direct implications upon an individual's mental/physical health and wellbeing.

Supportive avenues are signposted at each point of engagement wherever appropriate, and where necessary the consequences of non-payment are clearly outlined.

Debts categorised as priority include:

- Rent arrears and tenancy related charges.
- Mortgage repayments.
- Arrears relating to supported accommodation and care charges
- Council Tax and Business Rates.
- Unpaid maintenance and child support.
- Unpaid court fines.
- County Court Judgments.
- Income Tax, VAT and National Insurance contributions.
- Gas and electricity.
- Phone or Internet Bills.
- Television licence fees.
- Hire purchase for goods that are essential.
- Invoices for any essential services or goods.

Where a customer has accounts involving several charge/debt types, if one account is in credit and another is in debit, the customer will be contacted and encouraged to agree to the credit being transferred towards the debt.

Delayed recovery action due to delayed or missed payment will reduce the time in which the customer can pay. Priority is given to the most recent financial year's charge or invoice where older debts exist, to minimise or break the impact of the cyclical nature of annual/recurring charges such as Council Tax and Business Rates. Action is taken in a timely manner in accordance with an agreed schedule of recovery.

Under this strategy it is critical to target resource in order to collect the most recent, recoverable debt therefore the current year and three years

prior will be the targeted priority, and in certain circumstances debts over 3 years of age can be written off in line with the Corporate Write off Policy.

Recovery action is continuous, dynamic, and proportionate, within appropriate legislation, in its effort to strike a balance between the welfare of the individual/business, the community and their obligation to the Council. Where debt exists, the type of recovery action to be taken depends upon the type of debt.

Where the amount of resource it would require to recover a debt outweighs the amount of the debt itself then consideration will be given to writing the debt off and balancing the reasonableness of action taken.

The Council will set tolerances for unenforceable debts of low balances which are considered in the Corporate Write off Policy. These amounts are set to prevent cases of low balances going through recovery action which incurs costs that are disproportionate to the amount originally owed. But cases of low balances are also filtered out to prevent further action being taken on balances which may be made up of solely court costs.

Transparency in recovery action maintains public confidence, ensuring the customer understands what is expected of them and what they can expect from the Council. Advice and information provided by the local authority is clear and concise.

Where a customer is in severe, short-term hardship then an application for discretionary Council Tax Reduction can be submitted under S13(A) Local Government Finance Act 1992 for the charge to be remitted under circumstances outlined in the associated policy.

The Council accepts that there are customers who can afford to pay who don't, these are the people that recovery action needs to focus/nudge into setting up arrangements and Direct Debits and where that fails push for payment via the actions outlined above.

In collecting Council Tax, employment details will be requested at every appropriate opportunity as Attachment of Earnings Orders are the preferred method of recovery should this become necessary. This form of action avoids the added costs of Enforcement Agents being passed on to the Customer but also expedites Council collection.

The Collections Team is committed to developing new ways to identify those who have the ability and means to pay and taking more focused recovery action against them.

The Collections Team have moved away from resource heavy Attachment of Benefits action which routinely deducts debt payments from benefit



claimants therefore enforcing financial sanction on those who struggle to pay.

While this method is still used, it will be utilised more as a focused, evidence based, controlled action where the result is not lengthy, consecutive orders with additional court costs felt by the customer.

## **6. Council Tax and Business Rates Recovery**

Recovery action taken up to and including Magistrates Court follows the below stages for Council Tax and Business Rates:

- Reminder of instalment due – a maximum of two reminders in respect of charges will be issued in any financial year.
- Summons £53.80 court costs – automatic payment arrangement sent out at Summons stage including the court costs for summons and Liability Order.
- Liability Order in the Magistrates Court with £41.20 court costs.
- Payment Arrangement – outside of the automatic repayment arrangements set up at Summons stage.

Post Court action and Enforcement action post Magistrates Court is as follows (It should be noted that a payment arrangement including any associated costs can be made at any time):

- Attachment of DWP Benefits (Council Tax only) – action against those on benefits need to be considered and contacted to apply for Local Council Tax Reduction where this is not currently in payment. A more targeted view of this will be taken and only where no other option remains available.
- Attachment of Earnings (Council Tax only).
- Attachment of Council Members Allowances (Council Tax only).
- Referral to Enforcement Agent Service, County Durham Outreach and Support for in-county balances and an external contractor for out of area. The outstanding debt must be £100 or more, and this referral includes action such as signposting to assistance, taking control of goods including the immobilisation of vehicles.
- Insolvency actions (bankruptcy/winding up) - debt must be £750 or more for winding up proceedings and £5,000 or more for bankruptcy.
- Charging Order – (Council Tax only) debt must be £1,000 or more for the property giving rise to the charge – The case does not have

to progress through Enforcement Agent Stage if Senior Officer/Team Leader approval given to pursue.

- Committal to Prison - debt must be a minimum of £1000 and will be taken sparingly where there is significant benefit for the authority or the residents of Durham. Referral to Team Leader/ Assistant Manager required for sign off.

## **7. Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery**

Recovery action to be taken against Housing Benefit overpayment debts progress through the following stages:

- Reminder
- Final Notice
- Payment Arrangement
- Payment Deduction Programme (deductions from DWP Benefits)
- Direct Attachment of Earnings
- Debt Collection Agency

## **8. Sundry Debt Collection (including Adult Social Care)**

Sundry Debts progress through recovery action to the County Court Action prior to the County Court consists of:

- Reminder
- Final Notice
- Payment Arrangement
- Cessation of Service (where appropriate)
- Debt Collection Agency
- County Court Judgment

Sundry Debts escalate through a recovery process and there are prescribed recovery tolerances in place for different charge types and amounts which generally dictate what action is taken based on service specific considerations. The service areas are given discretion as to which cases the Collections Teams would escalate through further recovery.

Action that can be taken to enforce Sundry debt is outlined below:

- High Court Writ/Enforcement Agents – debt must be at least £600.

- Warrant of Control/County Court Bailiff – debt must be under £5,000.
- Attachment of Earnings (County Court).
- Order to Attend for Means Enquiry (County Court).
- Third Party Debt Order (County Court).
- Insolvency (bankruptcy/winding up) – debt must be £750 or more for winding up proceedings and £5,000 or more for bankruptcy.
- Charging Order – debt must be £600 or more.

## **9. Parking Fines**

Parking fines are recovered via the below process, and are escalated to Enforcement with County Durham Outreach and Support and the external contractor if unsuccessful:

- Notice to owner.
- Charge Certificate.
- Application to the Traffic Enforcement Centre.
- Order for Recovery.
- Warrant of Execution.
- Payment Arrangement.

## **10. Business Improvement District Levy**

BIDs are recovered via the below process and if uncollected are escalated to Enforcement with County Durham Outreach and Support:

- Reminder.
- Summons (£53.80 costs).
- Liability Order in the Magistrates Court (£41.20 costs).
- Payment Arrangement (up to 3 months).

## **11. Payment Arrangements, Financial Statement submission and Review**

Where appropriate and acceptable a sustainable and realistic payment arrangement should be set up prior to court action. If there is any doubt as to the sustainability of the arrangement, the customer should be asked to complete an income and expenditure review. This can be done over the

telephone with a member of staff, or a link sent to the customer to complete independently online.

Where customers are experiencing financial difficulties to the extent that an affordable, sustainable repayment arrangement cannot be agreed and financial evidence has been provided by an Income and Expenditure process, they should be signposted for assistance to relevant debt advice charities or internal departments and a reasonable hold placed on the account to allow for intervention to take place.

An income and expenditure review is conducted via access to a budget calculator which provides access to the Standard Financial Statement. This provides reasonable/standardised tolerances for categories of income and expenditure provided by customers and is utilised across the third sector and support agencies.

All payment arrangements are confirmed in writing and include service contact details as well as the notification that recovery action will continue without notice should the arrangement not be maintained.

Arrangements can be renegotiated following a change in circumstances. Any renegotiation or arrangements would take into consideration the number of broken arrangements already made, financial information received and the regularity/balance of previous payments. If the arrangement is ordered by the court, then a variation order may be required.

## **12. County Durham Outreach and Support (CDOS)**

Where there is non-payment and no alternative, debts (Council Tax, Business Rates, Parking Fines, BIDs and Commercial Rent) will be referred to the Council's Enforcement Agent Service for collection. The introduction of an in-house Enforcement Agent service in 2020 provides the opportunity for a more joined-up, streamlined and flexible approach to debt recovery and management. CDOS works all in-county cases in parallel with the contracted external agency for out of area debt. The external contractor is also there to provide CDOS with any needed resilience, guidance, capacity and support.

When collecting Sundry Debt (General Charges and Adult Social Care) and Housing Benefit Overpayment, CDOS will attempt Debt Collection via outbound campaigns and visits where possible, but fees cannot be applied and there are no legal powers of Enforcement for these debts.

The ability to refer debt to an Enforcement Agent is an important tool in the recovery process but the Council appreciates the political sensitivity surrounding Enforcement Agent action. County Durham Outreach and

Support (CDOS - Internal Enforcement Agent Service) was setup with the objective of collecting but also considering customer welfare where needed.

Procedures are in place to filter out any Council Tax cases with financial vulnerability/extra needs before automated escalation to CDOS. These procedures continue to be reviewed and developed to try and refine the results, so any unintended action is avoided but collection rates aren't impacted by broad, blanket recovery holds.

The aim of developing this process, is for CDOS to focus on cases where the ability to pay exists but the inclination is not forthcoming, protecting the interests of those within the County who do pay.

As a member of CIVEA, (The Civil Enforcement Agency) the principal trade association representing civil enforcement agencies, CDOS are held to a high professional standard. Audits are completed annually to ensure robust procedures exist to guarantee code of conduct compliance. Performance management measures are implemented to ensure compliance and quality of service (this also applies to the external contractor).

CDOS signpost customers to varying sources of support including the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, discretionary and hardship funding, Welfare Rights, Advice in County Durham network support agencies, Step Change and Credit Unions, Housing Solutions, social care, etc. and work towards measuring this as a Performance Indicator.

The Enforcement Agents identify and promote entitlements to discounts, exemptions, and reliefs as appropriate to maximise income for stakeholders.

A key factor for Enforcement Agents is the ability to identify vulnerability/customers struggling to manage financially, adopting a supportive and flexible approach. Action will be withdrawn where appropriate, and the external contractor will have a dedicated team to deal with vulnerable customers and situations.

If the debt has been referred to the external Collections Agency to collect, the Council will intervene where there are exceptional circumstances to seek a resolution.

CDOS and the third-party Enforcement Agency will be informed of any payments received by the Council, or changes to the charges, on debts referred for collection. This does not prejudice any statutory fees or charges levied by the third party for recovery action taken on behalf of the Council.

When a case is returned to the Collections Team or Enforcement and Insolvency the method of return will signify the follow up work needed. Employment details of debtors are the priority and will be utilised in place of Enforcement action should this prove ineffective.

### **13. Enforcement and Insolvency Team**

The Insolvency and Enforcement Team act on debts which have escalated through the Recovery/Court/Enforcement Agent process. This team deals with the more contentious accounts where it is believed that the financial security to pay exists, but they lack the propensity to pay. There must also be no reason/engagement received to believe that any action would exacerbate an existing vulnerability.

Throughout the recovery processes undertaken by this team, should constructive engagement be entered into which contradicts this belief then consideration will be given to the cessation of action being taken where appropriate as well as signposting wherever appropriate.

Accounts are returned from CDOS or the external Enforcement Agent company to the Collections Team for consideration of an Attachment of Earnings, arrangement due to vulnerability, Trace or write off while others are channelled into the Insolvency and Enforcement Team for possible further action.

Consideration will be given to the most effective or appropriate recovery method by the Insolvency and Enforcement Team.

This will include:

- Insolvency action - Insolvency action will only be taken following advice and guidance from an appointed partner specialising in that subject.
- County Court Action on Sundry debts as per Paragraph 8.
- Charging Order - Leading to a possible forced sale - an Order of Sale will only be applied for in accordance with the relevant legislation, civil procedure rules and good practice. A full review will be undertaken to determine the individual's circumstances as well as to establish that there is sufficient equity in the property ensuring such action is cost effective.
- Committal to prison proceedings (a sentence could be for up to 90 days) – this will only be considered as a last resort because it is punitive and not corrective and therefore does not result in the debt being paid if incarceration is the result, meaning resource is expended and no income clawed back.

- Write off – this will be considered where it becomes apparent that recovery is not possible and/or the circumstances fall within the scope of the write off policy.

Customers who become subject to further enforcement action will have had many opportunities to engage with DCC to prevent further action. Every attempt will be made to contact the customer directly by telephone, email, and post with at least two written warning notices being issued advising of the potentially severe consequences.

A home/site visit can be undertaken by a member of the Insolvency and Enforcement Team prior to committal to prison proceedings or insolvency action where it is deemed necessary/appropriate.

Staff will take reasonable steps to establish and understand the customer's circumstances as well as the potential implications of taking further enforcement actions. Including but not limited to:

- Whether the customer has the means to pay.
- Whether the customer has any assets.
- Past payment history.
- Whether the customer is vulnerable or has any other extenuating circumstances that would reasonably preclude further enforcement action being taken

Staff will record and document any contact, warning notices, visits and note all reasons for the chosen action being appropriate in that case. Peer review as well as management sign off be required before an action is initiated.

On engagement where required Customers will be signposted to any approved and appropriate advice service or organisation.

Consideration will also be given to other wider implications in all cases:

- Ongoing liability and future charges.
- Duty to those who do pay to recover against those who do not.
- The Council's reputation.

#### **14. Tracing Absconded Customers**

Where the customer has moved house or 'gone away' without providing a forwarding address, every reasonable and proportionate attempt will be made to locate the individual within procedural guidelines.

The Council will make all necessary attempts to trace any customer to ensure that recovery action can be continued. Attempts made to trace a customer and action taken will be proportionate to the level of debt involved.

Where permitted, searches will be conducted with the help of credit referencing agencies to help trace absconders and gain insight into a customer's ability to pay. Consideration will be given to the use of tracing agents where necessary and if there is an effective process in place to deal with any new contact details that come to light.

Social media in the public domain can also be used in line with the relevant policy where appropriate.

The timelines of tracing, allowing time for the customer to establish a financial link to their new address, alongside the size/age of the debt will be considered and the debt written off where the resource needed outweighs the benefit to the business.

## **15. People with extra needs/in need of support**

Customers who find themselves in debt often have multiple debts which spiral and affect the whole family, their quality of life and wellbeing. Staff dealing with individuals and families in difficult situations will receive training on recognition of hardship/possible vulnerability and when to refer for extra help and advice.

Recovery action taken to recover debt can often cause distress, especially where the person is holistically indebted. Where practical, to avoid this, The Council will encourage anyone with concerns/in need of support to engage at every step and ensure that any mutually agreed repayment arrangements are affordable, sustainable and that the customer understands any/all options available to them that could minimise costs, maximise income and avoid accruing further debt in the future.

Where the service is advised of circumstances and/or it has been substantiated that recovery action will have a significant detrimental effect on the customer's wellbeing, the action may be held for a reasonable and appropriate period to allow time for an agreeable resolution to be found or the appropriate assistance, guidance and support through signposting to internal or external services is accessed.

The benefit of understanding the challenges of customers within the county is acknowledged, particularly those with a low disposable income, unemployed or existing on resources just above their minimum needs.



Intrusive recovery action will not be undertaken in cases where genuine hardship or vulnerability affecting a customer's ability to pay is evidenced. The same applies to cases where it is apparent that recovery action would be detrimental to health and wellbeing of the customer. Customers will not be asked to make unrealistic repayments at a rate that is not sustainable.

Certain actions can be taken temporarily to mitigate the immediate circumstances the customer may find themselves in until a more long-term solution can be put in place:

- Postponing or withdrawing recovery action.
- Assisting and signposting the person to claim benefits, financial assistance, reductions in charge, other entitlements and support.
- Providing documentation and information in an accessible and acceptable format.
- Agreeing a temporary repayment arrangement with lower payments than would normally be agreed.
- Informing other appropriate service areas within the Authority of any concerns regarding the customer's safety or welfare.

Discretion will be used (within the appropriate legislation) to backdate Council Tax Reduction entitlement when continuous good cause can be demonstrated. The Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme entirely covers the Council Tax charge of those most in need of support in the Local Area.

Special consideration will also be given to those who are no longer taking responsibility of their own finances, for example, long-term hospital patients.

For the purposes of this Policy the key factors in determining whether a person should be regarded as vulnerable/needing additional support consideration will be given as to whether they may require support around their ability to deal with financial affairs or their ability to pay.

If effective support is provided in maintaining payments, then recovery action and any detrimental affect it may have had, will be avoided, or at least, minimised.

## **16. Characteristics possibly leading to increased chances of Vulnerability**

This section sets out characteristics which could lead to an individual/household needing extra support around finances. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and each case is considered on an individual basis taking into account relevant factors.

**Disabled Persons** - A person with a disability is not necessarily vulnerable, however, where the disability affects the person's ability to pay then the person should be considered to be vulnerable.

**Persons with Mental Health Impairment or Learning Difficulties** - Where an individual has mental health issues or learning difficulties which affect their ability to pay or understanding, or where recovery action would be detrimental to the individual's wellbeing then support should be offered. Further enquiries may need to be made with Social Services. A reduction in Council Tax may be applicable as there is provision within legislation for Severe Mental Health Impairment.

**Persons Experiencing Serious Illness (including Mental Illness)** - A customer or a customer's partner suffering from a serious or life-threatening condition that affects their ability to pay or understanding, or where recovery action would be detrimental to the individual's wellbeing then the person should be considered vulnerable.

**Those on Income Support, Job Seeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Universal Credit or Guaranteed Pension Credit** - They may be vulnerable for the purpose of this Policy as they may be experiencing financial hardship. Claimants that are new to Universal Credit in the first 6 weeks of the claim. Applications can take up to 6 weeks to be put into payment during which time customers may be experiencing extreme hardship.

**Unemployed Persons** - Unemployment does not automatically mean the customer is vulnerable. For example, a person may have received a substantial redundancy payment and be financially secure in the short-term. However, loss of employment may result in serious financial and personal difficulties if they are suddenly unable to meet their existing financial commitments. A person who has recently become unemployed after a long period of employment may be unfamiliar with processes for claiming benefits and may need additional assistance to understand their entitlements.

**A Person who has difficulty understanding English** - If a person does not understand either spoken or written English, vulnerability should be

considered, particularly if they do not have support from family members who can speak and read English. The Council will provide appropriate translation where necessary.

**Persons Aged Under 18** - It is unlikely that a person aged under 18 years will owe any sums to the Council. However, it is possible that a person may assist or care for a parent or other older person and could contact the Council on their behalf. A person aged under 18 years may be the only person at home when an enforcement visit takes place and therefore the visit should be abandoned. The Council will always treat any person under 18 years old as vulnerable.

**Care Leavers aged 18 to 25** – Although they receive some support from Children and Young People Services, Care leavers are faced with a new set of potentially overwhelming responsibilities, often without the family support and wider network that most other young people can rely on. The Council will always treat any person categorised as a care leaver as vulnerable.

**A Person Recently Bereaved** - A person suffering the recent bereavement of a partner, child or close relative may be considered to be a vulnerable person.

**Lone Parents** - A lone parent is not necessarily a vulnerable person, and it is recognised that some lone parents are financially secure. However, lone parents, and in particular those with very young children, may have difficulty in undertaking employment and are therefore reliant on welfare benefits.

**Pregnancy** - A person in the later stages of pregnancy may find dealing with serious financial issues stressful, particularly if they are not supported by a partner, or if they are living on a low income. Any additional essential expenditure due to the pregnancy or birth of a child can often compound this situation.

**A person that has difficulty reading or writing** - A person may be regarded as being vulnerable if they have difficulties in reading or writing because they are either unable to, or do not understand written notices. People who have difficulty reading or writing may be embarrassed and reluctant to reveal their difficulties. If there is concern that a person has such difficulties, sensitivity must be applied when dealing with such cases.

**Ex service personnel and veterans** - It is a national priority to assist ex-service personnel, particularly those who may have suffered ill health or injury because of service. The intention is to support them with the transition from military to civilian life.

Homeless Persons - A homeless person likely will be experiencing both personal and financial hardship. Individuals must be signposted to all relevant support and assistance, particularly Housing Solutions, Welfare Assistance, etc.

Victims of Domestic Abuse - This includes physical, mental or emotional harm and/or financial loss, and may result in depression, anxiety, other mental health issues

Carers - Carers are often in very stressful, emotional and sensitive circumstances and may be in need of extra help and support.

## **17. Signposting to Internal/External Services**

Whilst Collections staff can provide information around an individual's outstanding Local Authority debts, they are not fully trained or licensed experts in debt advice. Customers are referred for advice via the Advice in County Durham portal or signposted to StepChange Debt Charity. Information on these services and other advice agencies, are available on the Council's website ([www.durham.gov.uk](http://www.durham.gov.uk)) and on the back of the recovery letters issued throughout the process.

The Council recognises that many customers will experience personal financial difficulty at some point. Where there is genuine financial hardship, applications can be submitted for short term relief under the Council's Council Tax and Business Rates Discretionary Reduction Policies. The policies for these require certain specifications are met and other remedies are sought before applying.

Customers must be encouraged to maximise income where possible. This can be done by signposting and supporting customers to claim everything they are entitled to:

- Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS).
- Universal Credit for working age customers.
- Third Sector Support Agencies for free, independent debt advice including, Citizens Advice County Durham (CACD), East Durham Trust and Durham Christian Partnership.

Recovery action can be suspended, where there is potential for a substantial reduction in the amount owed. Working in conjunction with income maximisation is debt reduction; to help tackle customer indebtedness every effort will be made to make individuals aware of all discounts/reductions or reliefs including:

- The availability of discounts, exemptions, reliefs and disregards.

- Discretionary Housing Payments.
- Council Tax and Business Rates Discretionary Relief Policies (previously known as “Hardship”).

When possible, the Collections team for Council Tax and Business Rates as well as those administering Sundry Debt (General Services and Adult Social Care, make outbound telephone calls to proactively encourage engagement.

CDOS can provide visits from a welfare and support perspective where practicable and resource allows. This approach is particularly targeted at those customers identified to be ‘in crisis’ or ‘at financial risk’.

Customers have access to a portal for referrals to Advice in County Durham via the Collections Team, which refers customers for advice as well as an agreement to withhold action for an agreed amount of time for ‘live’ cases. This may be extended to 90 days where there is evidence that a customer is pursuing insolvency proceedings. This agreement also applies to the Council’s Enforcement Agent and Debt Collection internal and externally contracted services.

The Council Tax Protocol is a promissory document between the Collections Team and Citizens Advice County Durham to work to meet a best practice standard of balancing a welfare approach with Collection targets as well as working in tandem to provide a two-way support system for training and development.

Customers may also be made aware of other organisations specialising in free and independent debt advice such as Step Change and the National Debt Helpline to access free debt counselling. Those experiencing financial difficulties should be given every assistance with money management. In certain cases, consultation with Social Services, Police or other appropriate agencies may be required.

## **18. Breathing Space**

The Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space Moratorium and Mental Health Crisis Moratorium) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 4 May 2021. The Regulations apply to a wide range of debts including, Council Tax, Business Rates, Sundry Debt and Parking Fines.

Breathing Space gives eligible people in problem debt, who received professional debt advice, access to a sixty-day period in which interest, fees and charges are frozen and enforcement action is paused. The legislation requires debt advisers to assess eligibility to breathing space and establish if it is the most appropriate debt solution. Debt Advice in

County Durham may be accessed locally from Citizens Advice County Durham, East Durham Trust and Durham Christian Partnership or nationally from Citizens Advice or StepChange.

A separate Breathing Space scheme exists for those in receipt of mental health crisis treatment and the referral must be completed by an approved mental health professional. The recovery action moratorium on this particular scheme will end 30 days after the crisis treatment ends or 30 days from the last contact with the customer.

## **19. Performance Monitoring and Indicators**

Performance is primarily measured in terms of the rate of in-year debt collection.

Current processes mean that the recovery action taken is done via a prescriptive, bulk approach, particularly in the early stages of the process.

By developing targeting methods in working to collect from those who “Won’t pay” rather than those who “Can’t pay.” resource is focused on the “won’t payers”, this bolsters the welfare approach whilst minimising the financial impact on the Key Performance Indicator, as costly resource is being used to accrue revenue from those who have it.

Recovery or enforcement action is not actively targeted at those who knowingly cannot pay.

## **20. Costs and Interest**

The addition of court costs to a debt is considered during any customer engagement to ensure the incursion of fees is reasonable. Where they are reasonably and legally incurred, costs and/or fees will be added to the amount(s) already owed.

The teams within Collections have the flexibility to withdraw costs where they deem them unreasonable to be added. Costs can be considered at any time in the recovery period and written off where circumstance warrants it.

Where legislation allows, statutory and/or reasonable fees and costs incurred in taking recovery action will be added to the amount(s) already owed.

In certain circumstances the level of costs will be determined by the Court. However, where there is financial hardship, officers will have discretion not to enforce costs but the justification for this must be documented.

At the discretion of the Court interest may be added to a sundry debt once a County Court Judgment is obtained. Interest accrues daily at a rate of 8%

from the date of the invoice until the date the County Court Judgment is granted.

If a charging order is obtained, for any debt stream<sup>1</sup>, interest of 8% also accrues from the date the final charging order was granted, until the date the debt is paid in full. Again, this is at the Court's discretion and would be decided by the Judge when the final charging order is granted. Consideration will be given to the interest accrued in the recovery moratorium due to COVID.

Whilst interest is not an incurred expense, it does compensate for the additional cost in obtaining a judgment Fund for the loss of cash flow.

The officers managing cases and representing the Council at Court have delegated powers which allow the discretion to remove all or part of the interest charged should circumstances justify this.

## **21. Service Improvement and development**

The Service will continue to develop, test and review processes and procedures to enhance Collection Rates. Promote effective customer engagement and implement targets outlined in Service Improvement Plans.

The Council is committed to continuous improvement, and it is critical that new approaches and ways of working are challenged to make effective improvements. Technology will be utilised to automate, expedite, and streamline whatever processes are possible maximising efficiency and resource.

Staff are empowered to suggest improvements to service provision and the culture being promoted is one of positivity around change and is rooted in the Council's Core Values.

Any feasible ideas with an advantageous time/resource ratio will be tried and tested/piloted to see if the suggested approach is plausible and effective.

This policy will be subject to bi-annual review and assessed on its contribution to the improvement process alongside relevant service plans. The Finance and Transactional Service teams have robust mechanisms in place to review the effectiveness of the application of this Policy in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> under the County Courts (Interest on Judgment Debts) Order 1991 Section 4(2)