

Fair Debt Principles

The Council has put into place a corporate debt policy. This policy aims to:

- Facilitate a co-ordinated approach to managing multiple debts owed to the Council
- Identify where appropriate support may be required, to those owing money to the Council and ensure their circumstances are taken into consideration
- Apply best practice in relation to debt collection

The Council takes its financial responsibilities in maximising income very seriously and aims to continually improve its financial management. The Council however is equally serious about its social responsibilities in ensuring that fair debt principles will be considered as part of debt collection.

The Council's aims are shown below:

- A significant proportion of debtors are on low incomes or housing and council tax benefit. Debtors may owe more than one debt to the Council. As a result we will always try to consider their total indebtedness. We will work to:
 - Not add to the debt owed due to inability to pay through additional costs being applied,
 - Not cause arrears to occur elsewhere i.e. through unrealistic recovery rates applied to individual debts,
- Ensure that we facilitate a coordinated approach to sharing information in order to assist in managing multiple debts owed to the Council
- We will be clear and concise in managing debts by:
 - Providing assistance to avoid and minimise debts occurring, through implementation and review of preventative actions taken across the Council,
 - Ensure that appropriate support is given to those owing money to the Council,
 - Consider the circumstances of individuals particularly where it is identified that they are vulnerable,
 - Provide customers with information on where to get help and advice about benefits and debt problems. This will include information and advice from the Council and independent advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau, Community Law Services, Northampton credit union and other independent advice organisations.

- By providing information on payment options,
- By encouraging self-help,
- We will assist in maximising customers income by:
 - Ensuring we take a proactive approach to advertising eligibility to benefits,
 - Provide information about claiming housing and council tax benefit within arrears letters.
 - Ensure all new Council tenants receive both a housing benefit entitlement check and a financial health check when signing up for their tenancy.
- Work with welfare agencies to ensure that a co-ordinated approach is made in making arrangements to pay a debt. In these cases we will set frameworks that enable arrangements to be made by employees of trusted partners that are implemented by the Council
- Take every opportunity to engage with debtors prior to them incurring additional costs
- Ensure we monitor closely the conduct of bailiff and collection agencies employed by the Council. In all cases of distress (removal of possessions), the following goods will be protected from enforcement:
 - Such tools, books, vehicles, and other items of equipment as are necessary to the debtor for use personally in his employment, business or vocation.
 - Such clothing, bedding, furniture, household equipment and provisions as are necessary for satisfying the basic domestic needs of the debtor and his family.
- The Councils housing solution team provide a money advice service. As part of this service we will consider debts owed to outside agencies alongside Council debts.
- The Councils housing solution team will also work with vulnerable customers who contact the Council, both in terms of those fleeing domestic abuse, young single homeless households, homeless families, people with complex multiple needs, alcohol and or drug addiction, a history of offending, learning difficulties, physical disabilities with mental health needs and advice relating to debt.