



Service Delivery Committee	Tuesday, 22 March 2016	Matter for Information
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Title:

Community Services Update

Author:

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## 1. Introduction

This report is to provide an update to the Service Delivery Committee regarding the delivery of landlord Services and related community activities.

## 2. Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents contained within the report.

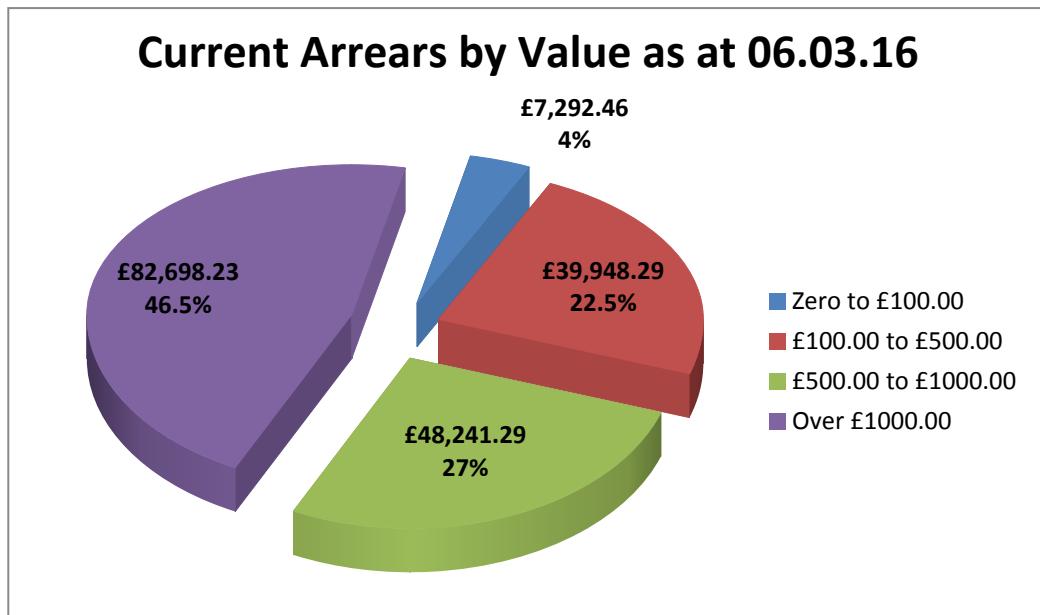
## 3. Rent Arrears - Situation Quarters 4 (2015-16)

Quarter 4 is not yet complete and so far rent arrears have continued to decrease during the first two months of the quarter. Current Tenant (Gross) arrears levels at the beginning of the quarter stood at £180,411.00 (Wk 40) and have now reduced to £178,180.27 as at 6<sup>th</sup> March 2016 (Wk 48).

A summary of the situation at the close of Wk 48 complete with comparisons to both Q3 2015-16 and Q4 Wk 48 last year (2014-15) is set out below:

Period	Gross Arrears	Net Arrears (Net of prepaid)	Comparison <u>Q3 2015-16</u> (Gross Arrears)	Comparison <u>Q3 2015-16</u> (Net Arrears)
Quarter 4 to date 2015-16 (Wk 48)	£178,180.27	£117,435.12	Decrease £8,713.76 ↓4.6%	Increase £10,464.13 ↑9.78%
			Comparison <u>Q4 2014-15</u> (Gross Arrears)	Comparison <u>Q4 2014-15</u> (Net Arrears)
			Decrease £32,670.73 ↓15.5%	Increase £34,905.88 ↓23%
Comparator Information				
Q3 2015-16	£186,894.03	£106,970.99		
Q4 to date (Wk48) 2014-15	£210,851.00	£152,341.00		

The breakdown of the debt in terms of value bandings at the close of Wk 48 is set out below:



These figures show that the cases that lie at the top end of the Value range, (Cases over £1000) have continued to fall as a result of the main thrust of the income officers' efforts until recently. Whilst efforts in this range will be maintained the thrust of our efforts over the last two months of the financial year will be switched to address those debts between £100 and £1000.

The number of cases in arrears, whilst variable on a week to week basis, has continued to drop during the course of Q4.

The debt level for the year to date, number of cases in arrears and analysis of the current tenant arrears on a monthly basis is set out in Appendix 1.

The team continue to maintain a steady increase in service of Notices of Intention to Seek Possession, new applications to court for possession and also in warrants for eviction as it continues to get to grips with cases. In addition as at 4<sup>th</sup> March 2016 all of the cases that had accrued zero to £500 during the month had been contacted and suitable actions taken or arrangements for repayment made.

The current level of arrears has significantly improved from the peak Of £252K in July 2015 to £178K as at week 48,a reduction of £74K. This is mainly due to having a settled team in place and by introducing a more performance based approach. Performance is continuing to improve month on month and the team will shortly be embarking on the last of 3 intensive campaigns carried out since December 2015, where every tenant who is in arrears will be contacted by letter and as far as possible, a visit or telephone call advising of the need to make payments towards reducing their debt during the next "Non Collectable" weeks which are the last two weeks of the financial year in March 2016.

It is confidently expected that we will achieve and beat the target set by Committee in respect of the current tenant arrears by the end of the financial year.

#### **4. Gas Safety**

Compliance as at 8 March 2016 was 99.9% due to one outstanding safety check where the previous safety certificate expired 12th February 2016. We have what we

believe to be a firm appointment made for Saturday 12 March 2016 to complete this work, however, should the tenant not keep this appointment we will commence legal action to gain entry.

Of 158 service / safety checks due in March 154 have been completed. The 4 outstanding remain in date at the time of writing this report.

Of 113 due in April, 90 have already been completed.

Detail of the Gas Safety Performance is set out in the table below:

<b>Gas Safety Compliance Date</b>	8 March 2016
<b>Oldest case CP12 expired (CP12 = Gas Safety Certificate )</b>	12 February 2016
<b>% CP12's compliant</b>	99.9%

## 5. Empty Properties ( Voids )

### Voids Situation (2015-16)

#### 5.1. Overall Voids Performance Year to Date

Overall void performance (Average Turnaround Time) for the financial year to date currently stands at:

**48** Properties let at an average of **36.5** Working Days

This represents a significant improvement on previous performance and follows a number of measures being introduced from 4<sup>th</sup> January 2016 to gain tighter control and faster turnaround of void properties which are not subject to major works. The two main measures introduced are, advertising future vacancies on the Leicestershire Choice Based Lettings system prior to them becoming empty and during the outgoing tenants' notice period. Weekly voids meetings have also been set up involving Housing Management, Housing Options and Property Maintenance where actions in respect of void properties are reviewed and action taken to eliminate or minimise delays.

#### 5.2. Voids Performance Since 04 January 2016

A summary of the performance for the period since the measures have been introduced (04/01/16 to 06/03/16) complete with a comparison to the situation prior (Year to date as at 03/01/16) is set out below:

<b>Period</b>	<b>Average Void Turnaround Time</b>
<b>4 January - 6 March 2016</b>	<b>25</b> Working Days (15 properties let)
<b>Year to Date up to 3 January 2016</b>	<b>42</b> Working Days (33 properties let)

These figures show that the measures so far, have significantly improved performance and the Committee should note that the last seven properties let (since 1 February) have been let at an average of **10.28 Working Days**.

It is the intention to meet a target routine void period of no more than 20 Working Days per property in order to maintain the decrease in the overall average turnaround time and improve upon this during the course of the next financial year. This is regarded as upper quartile performance when compared to other organisations in the social housing sector.

The Committee should note however that a potential threat to continued improvement in the management of voids is that some properties are less popular to applicants and consequently are more difficult to let. Currently these are identified as Studio/Bedsit Flats and also Sheltered Flats (principally William Peardon Court & Marriott House). The latter have only become a recent issue which is illustrated by the fact that a number of properties in the CBL advertising cycles attracted no bids from suitable applicants. An initial investigation into this shows that in the week commencing 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2016 there were a total of 32 sheltered accommodation units being advertised across Leicester and the immediate surrounding areas, which in effect increases the choice and opportunities for suitable applicants, which dilutes overall demand for these type of properties. We are currently exploring other methods of advertising which may boost demand for the future.

## **6. Update on Capital Programme 2014/15**

An update on the current capital programme is included at Appendix 2. A number of schemes have been contracted to run over the year end and into 2016/17. The Boulter Crescent project is a 24 month contract that was due to come to an end in May 2016. We have reported previously that the original phasing gave too little time to complete the works and decanting and action was taken to counter this by, wherever possible, having three blocks on site rather than two at any one time. Despite this the works will not now complete until August or September 3 or 4 months later than the original end date. As the delays have been related to both works periods and decanting logistics neither party is currently incurring any financial penalties and are working together to complete the project as soon as possible.

In terms of the number of homes this affects there will be 30 homes still to complete in 2016/17. Of these, 14 are already on site or will be by 31 March (8 scheduled to complete within the original contract period; 6 scheduled to run 2 weeks over).

The final phase of 16 homes will only just have started when the contract was due to end and will be completed between end of July and September.

## **7. Proposed Capital Programme Projects 2016/17**

The proposed projects for 2016/17 are set out in Appendix 3. These comprise of projects that straddle the year end; a small number of projects that have been tendered in advance of 2016/17 and the balance of projects we expect to be able to procure and complete by the end of the next financial year.

## **8. Future Development and Purchase Opportunities**

Architects have looked at the old garage block in Churchill Close Oadby and we are awaiting their proposals.

Following the decision at the last meeting to look for an external partner for development of the old Shoe Factory in Canal Street there has been no interest to date.

The scheme at Kirkdale Road that is due to come on stream in 2017 is being developed by Waterloo Housing Association and will provide 58 new homes. The Council has direct nomination rights to 6 properties and the other remaining properties will be let through the Choice Based Letting Scheme.

The Affordable Homes element of the Station Road Development which is a mixture of shared ownership and homes for rent is currently under negotiation between the developer and a registered provider.

There are also a small number of possible development and purchase opportunities at present which are currently being pursued.

## **9. Providers of Housing Related Advice Services**

Members will recall that the Council currently has an interim arrangement with CAB and Helping Hands for the provision of advice services within the Borough. The arrangement runs until the end of May 2016 and a joint proposal from CAB will be presented to the next Policy Finance and Development Committee.

## **10. CBL Statutory Consultation**

Further to the report submitted to this Committee in October 2015 regarding the review of the Housing Allocation Policy the statutory consultation process has now been completed. A separate report is attached for Members to consider.

## **11. Disabled Facility Grants (DFG's)**

Following the decision to allocate 2 suitable pilot projects to the Lightbulb project this has been done. 2 Schemes to install level access showers have been given to Lightbulb and a report once they are completed will be brought back to a future meeting of this Committee.

This will enable Members based on the outcomes of the pilots to consider using the Lightbulb Project as a means of delivering DFG's and adaptations for disabled tenants.

## **12. Housing Related Support and Warden Services**

A separate report regarding housing related support and warden services is attached for Members to consider.

## **13. Community Payback Schemes**

Following the successful completion of the previous schemes further projects are being planned for the spring of 2016.

## **14. Energy Conservation**

Work is progressing on the development of a comprehensive energy conservation strategy which will be used to drive our future planned maintenance programmes. Currently we are checking the EPC's (Energy Performance Certificates) to assess the most poorly performing properties. Where the information is not available we are using cloning methods to update the information.

External Wall Insulation to solid wall properties will be a high priority to reduce energy bills for tenants and to reduce greenhouse gasses.

Other measures may include the replacement of inefficient heating systems and new boiler controls, cavity wall and increased loft insulation; low energy bulbs in common areas.

## **15. Private Sector Empty Homes Update**

Further to the decision taken at the previous Committee to give delegated authority to officers take action to reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough this is an update of the situation to date.

### **15.1. Background and Scope of Action Plan**

Oadby and Wigston Borough Council are committed to reducing the numbers of long term empty properties within the Borough and thereby increasing the number of homes available for occupation. The identification and targeting of empty properties will enable the authority to make better use of this wasted resource whilst better responding to complaints made by the general public.

Current council tax records (March 2016) indicate that there are 159 empty residential dwelling within the Borough and a lesser amount of vacant commercial premises. This report outlines a brief description of how empty properties will be targeted. Previous work has extended to mailshots of known empty properties in August 2014 and July 2015 undertaken by Capacity Grid. Reporting from the Uniform database used by Environmental Health and Planning Teams will be utilised to highlight public complaints related to specific empty properties.

### **15.2. Empty Residential Dwellings**

There are currently 32 empty residential dwellings which have been empty for longer than two years and its owner eligible to pay 150% council tax rates. These will be targeted as a priority and in the first instance offered an empty property grant (discussed below). All other empty properties will be visited and contact made to establish the intentions of the owners and the offer of grant assistance made if appropriate.

An incremental enforcement approach will be taken by correspondence to empty property owners ranging from informal in the first instance to becoming progressively enforcement orientated. The intention of this is to make it clear what may happen if the owner takes no action. Each property owner will receive three letters before enforcement action is taken.

If no action is taken by the owners and the offer of grant assistance is not taken an options appraisal will be undertaken to decide if enforcement action is necessary and proportionate. This will largely depend on the following (list not exhaustive):

- a.** How long property has been empty;
- b.** Likelihood of property returning to use without council intervention;
- c.** Number of complaints received;
- d.** Detrimental impact on amenity of area; and
- e.** Ease and cost of conversion if undertaken by the authority.

#### **15.3. Grant Assistance Scheme**

A 100% grant is available for owners of empty properties and this will be offered initially in order to facilitate bringing properties back into use. The money is limited and will be decided on a case by case basis. Allocation of this money will depend on the number of applications, cost of renovation, the benefit to local area and the most in demand property size (e.g. 1, 2 or 3 bedroom).

As part of this project the following will be undertaken in relation to the grant scheme:

- Writing of procedural documents;
- Grant terms & conditions;
- Repayment terms when grant conditions not met;
- Linkage with the housing options team developed including tenant; and nomination rights for a set period of 5 years

Increasing public awareness – it may be necessary to publicise the offer of grant assistance in local press if long term empty owners do not take up the grant. All information will be required to be uploaded to the Council's website.

The Council will also seek to create a match making database holding details of empty property owners and developers looking to buy empty homes so that properties can be bought back into use.

#### **15.4. Empty Property Enforcement**

As have previously been agreed the following enforcement action will be commenced where necessary as identified by an options appraisal to bring homes back into use:

- a.** Compulsory Purchase Orders
- b.** Empty Dwelling Management Orders
- c.** Work in default and subsequent enforced sale
- d.** Section 215 Planning Powers

#### **15.5. Commercial Premises**

Discussion with the planning department will be undertaken to identify how empty commercial office accommodation can be converted into residential dwellings as this no longer requires planning permission.

#### **15.6. Timescales**

Empty property cases can take a significant amount of time to see through to a positive conclusion. It is estimated that setting up the initial processes and procedures together with contacting all the empty property owners and reaching the point where enforcement action can be instigated will take around 3 months.

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<b>Implications</b>	
Financial (CR)	CR1 - Decreasing financial resources. The level of arrears and void turnaround times will affect the Council's net current assets position on its balance sheet and needs intensive management. Progress on the Capital schemes will affect the projected out-turn position.
Legal (AC)	No significant implications.
Risk (SG)	CR1 - Decreasing financial resources. CR4 - Damage to reputation by failing to tackle empty homes in the private sector. CR9 - Economy.
Equalities (AC)	No significant implications.