

Appendices: 1



**NORTHAMPTON**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

## AUDIT COMMITTEE REPORT

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>Corporate debt – Progress and Age debt analysis</b>
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**AGENDA STATUS: PUBLIC**

<b>Audit Committee Meeting Date:</b>	6 <sup>th</sup> March 2017
<b>Policy Document:</b>	No
<b>Directorate:</b>	Finance Directorate LGSS
<b>Accountable Cabinet Member:</b>	Cllr Brandon Eldred

### 1. Purpose

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- 1.1 To update Committee on the position regarding the Council's outstanding debts as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017.
- 1.2 The detailed focus of the report this month is primarily on Council Tax as this is the area that has been receiving the most scrutiny recently.

### 2. Recommendations

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- 2.1 To note the latest position in relation to the Council's outstanding debts as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017
- 2.2 To consider whether Committee requires any additional information in order to fulfil its governance role.

### 3. Issues and Choices

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#### 3.1 Report Background

- 3.1.1 The Revenues and Benefits Service compile a corporate debt summary that monitors the % of debt not currently managed (inactive debt) within the Council. This has been in place for a number of years and provides assurance that all debt is managed to a high standard and not left idle. The % that is shown relates to debt that has fallen

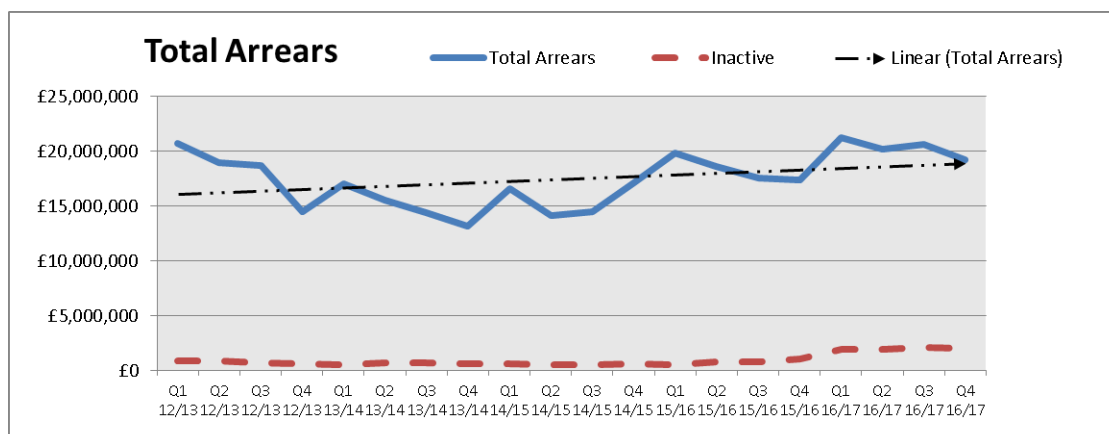
out of one status and is in the process of being moved to another stage. This summary also provides a view of the current status of debt.

- 3.1.2 Managed debt is where a debt type is within a specific set of clearly measurable criteria, and unmanaged debt is outside these criteria. An example of this is:

Criteria “Invoiced debt will be sent a reminder if it remains unpaid after 28 days”. All debts invoiced and outstanding less than 29 days is “managed”, any debt outstanding after 28 days, outstanding and not issued with a reminder is “unmanaged”. The debt that has just had a reminder issued would then become subject to a new set of criteria for invoices at reminder stage, which it is measured against.

- 3.1.3 This principle supports the theory that managed debt is more likely to be paid, and more promptly. It can be applied to all stages in the life of a debt, how long a disputed debt is on hold, how long a debt is with enforcement agents, or how long it takes to go through a legal process etc.
- 3.1.4 The process supports evidence gathering for process change and improvement, identifying blockages, removing hearsay and myth busting, and the write-off of irrecoverable debts at an earlier stage.
- 3.1.5 Each service area has a detailed recovery timetable, with definitions of debt type and criteria that recovery is taken against.
- 3.1.6 The amount of unmanaged debt is a corporate KPI. Currently being no more than 4.5% of the total amount of outstanding arrears.
- 3.1.7 Although the KPI is measured on a monthly basis for internal performance purposes, it is reported quarterly, and the graphs used below provide a pictorial illustration of performance since the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012.
- 3.1.8 Half-yearly performance for the same period, demonstrated by value of managed, unmanaged and total arrears outstanding can be found in **Appendix A**.

### 3.1.9 Overall debt levels as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017

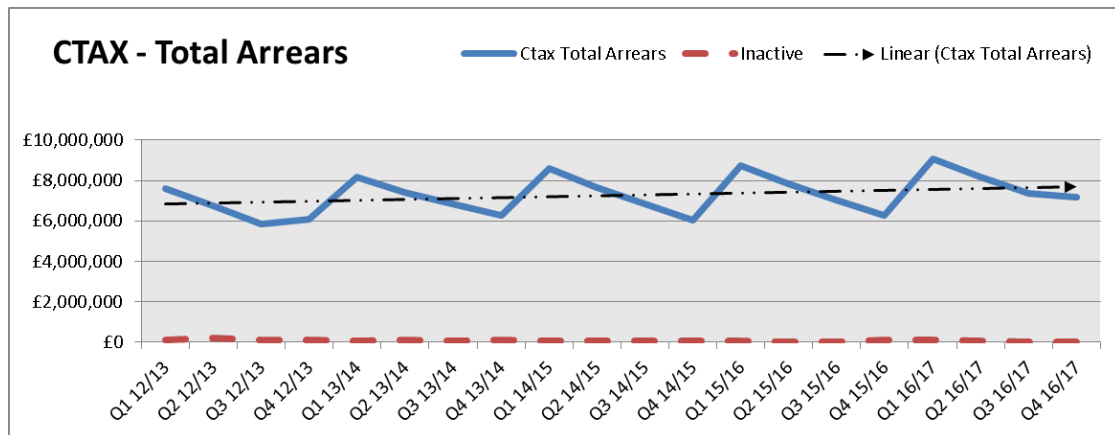


3.1.10 The overall outstanding arrears have increased by £2,554k compared to the same point last year. Please see individual debt types for explanation of the increase.

3.1.11 Unmanaged debt is £933k more than the same time last year. The majority of unmanaged debt within the Council sits within Asset management and is currently standing at £1.4m. The Asset management debt type is the collection and recovery of the commercial rent and any associated insurance, for council land and buildings. This does not include the Council's housing stock.

3.1.12 A significant part (£1,080k) of the unmanaged debt in the asset management debt type relates to County Developments (Northampton) Ltd, which is currently part of the Council's on-going discussions with the Liquidators.

3.1.13 Council Tax as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017



- 3.1.14 The overall outstanding arrears are £259k more than at the same point last year, which is due to an increase in the Council Tax charge in 2015/16 and a reduction in the 2015/16 Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- 3.1.15 Unmanaged debt is £45k less than the same time last year and the amount of debt collected against arrears is £388k higher during this financial year.
- 3.1.16 The continued introduction of Welfare Reforms continue to increase the pressure on those liable for Council Tax and on a low income. There has also been a significant rise in the number of attachment of benefits orders.
- 3.1.17 The current amount of unmanaged (inactive debt) is 0.39%, which is seen as good performance and maximising the opportunity to collect any outstanding arrears.
- 3.1.18 Whilst there are pressures on in-year collection, the table shows that the Council is making efforts to collect monies over the longer term. This is more often than not, arrangements of smaller amounts over the longer term. This is the most proven way of helping our customers make sustainable repayment plans and equally allowing the balancing of their personal budgets.
- 3.1.19 Comparison between the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017 and the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016
- 3.1.20 The continued introduction of Welfare Reforms continues to increase the pressure on those liable for Council Tax and on a low income. There has also been a significant rise in the number of attachment of benefits orders.

- 3.1.21 The table below 3.1.25 provides some context around the impact that the welfare reforms are having on both our service users and the service.
- 3.1.22 The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) is the support provided towards the Council Tax for those customers on a low income.
- 3.1.23 An Attachment of Benefit (AOB) is a deduction from a debtor's benefit, which can only be made after a liability order has been granted. The current rate is £3.70 per week.
- 3.1.24 Special Arrangements (SPARs) are non-statutory arrangements made on accounts where a summons has been issued and a customer has agreed to repay the debt over a period of time, based on their personal circumstances.

3.1.25 The table below highlights some of the key impacts, predominately as a result of the introduction of welfare reforms

In-year collection rate	92.95%	31-Jan-17	92.90%	31-Jan-16
Annual CTRS award	£11m	2016/17	£11.7m	2015/16
Uncollected liability CTRS cases	£1.1m	31-Jan-17	£0.93m	31Jan16adj
CTRS caseload	15,660	31-Jan-17	16,417	31-Jan-16
AOB	£1.2m	31-Jan-17	£817k	31-Jan-16
Monthly amount collected	£30k	31-Jan-17	£29.6k	31-Jan-16
AOB hold	604k	31-Jan-17	£469k	31-Jan-16
SPARs	£1.6m	31-Jan-17	£1.2m	31-Jan-16
Reminders & Finals issued	50,763	31-Jan-17	47,748	31-Jan-16
Summons	10,767	31-Jan-17	9,286	31-Jan-16

3.1.26 The Council has implemented cut of 8% in the amount of CTRS awarded in 2016/17, the overall collection rate has increased from 92.90% in 15/16 to 92.95%, in comparison to the end of January. However this is due to improved collection on non-CTRS cases.

3.1.27 The Council continues to be collecting debt from people, who in previous years, were used to receiving more financial support for their Council Tax.

3.1.28 Whilst the annual amount of CTRS awarded has reduced by 6%, the amount of uncollected liability on the same cases has increased by £107k.

3.1.29 The CTRS caseload falling by 4.6% means that the uncollected liability is also being borne by fewer customers.

3.1.30 The amount of debt subject to an attachment of benefit is significantly higher than last year, as is the amount of debt that is being held awaiting an existing attachment to be paid off. A customer can only have one attachment for council tax in operation at any given time. The monthly amounts being paid direct from the DWP has remained the same, which demonstrates a large increase in the number of customers subject to an attachment, but not necessarily clearing the overall liability.

3.1.31 The issue of recovery documents has increased as compared to last year, with reminders and final notices being up 6%, and summonses being up 16%.

### 3.1.32 Collection Rates for CTRS cases

3.1.33 The table below highlights the comparison between the claimant types between the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017 2016 and the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016.

January	2016/17			
CTRS SCHEME	LIABILITY	RECEIPTS	COLLECTION RATE	UNCOLLECTED
	£	£		£
Vulnerable households are claimants who are either lone parents or couples with at least one dependent under 5 years old.	482,874.22	290,174.59	60.09%	192,699.63
Vulnerable are claimants on NBCs local scheme or modified scheme e. g. War widows and disablement pension cases	317.31	456.11	143.74%	-138.80
Pensionable cases are claimants who are of pensionable age and are exempt from the CTRS reduction.	901,359.37	932,623.31	103.47%	-31,263.94
Working age employed are claimants who are either single people or couples who are in paid employment.	1,165,009.65	883,579.71	75.84%	281,429.94
Working age other are claimants who are either single people or couples not in paid employment, and in receipt of DWP benefits.	1,950,475.55	1,282,749.45	65.77%	667,726.10
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>4,500,036.10</b>	<b>3,389,583.17</b>	<b>75.32%</b>	
January	2015/16			
CTRS SCHEME	LIABILITY	RECEIPTS	COLLECTION RATE	UNCOLLECTED
	£	£		£
Vulnerable households	416,109.43	268,842.44	64.61%	147,266.99
Vulnerable	1,238.69	1,323.54	106.85%	-84.85
Pensionable	926,933.11	963,583.49	103.95%	-36,650.38
Working age employed	1,095,742.00	813,523.22	74.24%	282,218.78
Working age others	1,540,161.27	1,019,079.03	66.17%	521,082.24
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>3,980,184.50</b>	<b>3,066,351.72</b>	<b>77.04%</b>	

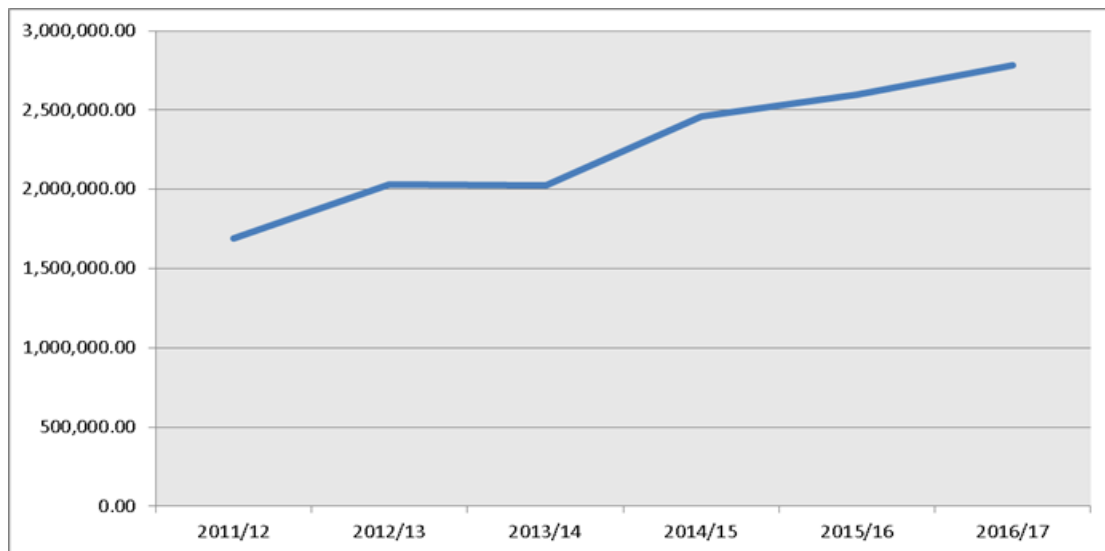
3.1.34 Whilst the overall collection for CTRS cases is 75.32% for 2016/17, it should be noted that the collection rate, excluding pensioners, remains at 71.24%. This is a reduction in collection rate, as compared to the increase reported in 3.1.26 above, and suggests that not only is this customer group finding it more difficult to pay, but disproportionately also.

- 3.1.35 For those customers that cannot, or won't, make an arrangement, they will be issued with a summons. Although there is not much attendance at court, the Council will still make an arrangement at this stage.
- 3.1.36 There has been an increase in the number of summons issued in the first ten months of the financial year.
- 3.1.37 Where a Liability Order is obtained, the Council's preferred option is to serve an attachment of benefit, and the use of this method of repayment is on the increase compared to previous years. The Council currently collects £30k per month through AOB, as compared to £29.6k last year.
- 3.1.38 It should be noted that the maximum amount of money that can be deducted is £3.70 per week, regardless of how much a customer owes, and the recovery of council tax is not a priority debt for deduction by the DWP. The maximum a customer in these circumstances can repay is £192.40 per year. In 2016/17, an unparished band A property with two adults would be liable for £1,026.90, reducing by maximum CTR would leave the customer liable to pay £279.95. The issue of a summons would add a further £82.40, leaving a customer with an annual charge of nearly £170 more than the Council is able to recover.
- 3.1.39 There is also a process to support customers whose debt is passed to Enforcement Agents, similar to that provided by the Council.
- 3.1.40 Where customers are making realistic arrangements to pay these are often small amounts, over a long period of time, regardless of what point of the recovery cycle a customer has reached. Customers have struggled to maintain even these small value arrangements and this increases the cost to the Council to administer.

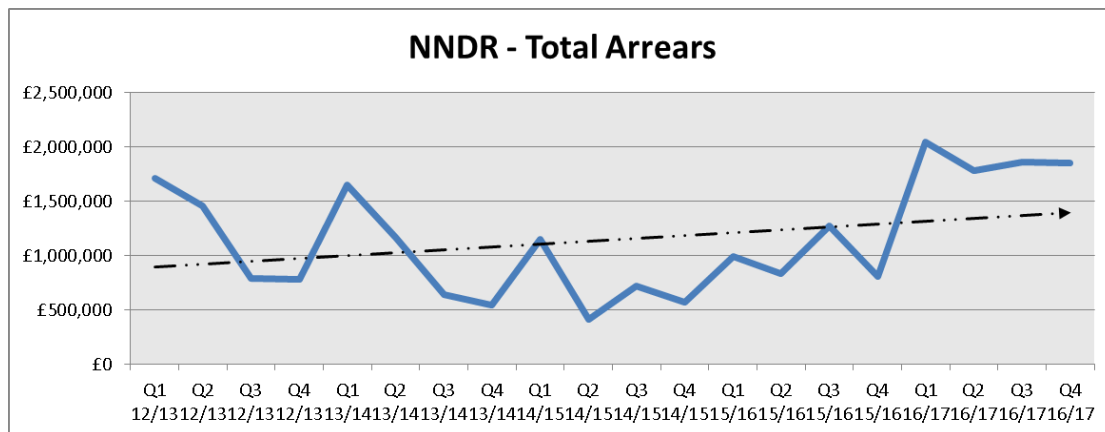


### 3.1.41 Historic council tax arrears collection

The table below demonstrates the increase in arrears collected in each of the last 6 financial years. However it should be noted that the 2016/17 figure is 10 months of collection, rather than a full year of arrears collection for the previous years.



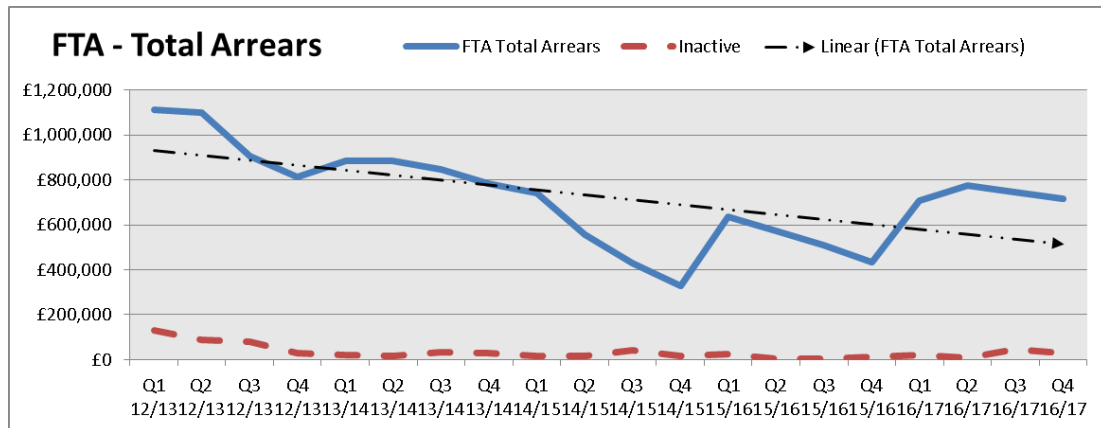
### 3.1.42 Business Rates (NNDR) as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017



3.1.43 The overall outstanding arrears are £971k more than at the same point last year. This is primarily due to an increase the 2015/16 business rates multiplier and one business which has a backdated account. This is expected to be paid by the end of March 2017.

3.1.44 Unmanaged debt remains unchanged in NNDR as all accounts continue to be monitored on a monthly basis, due to the low number and high value of cases.

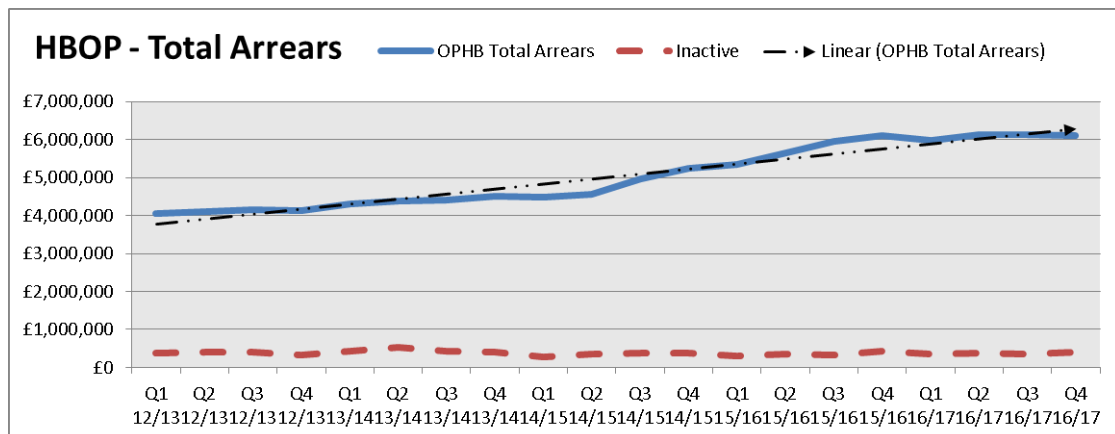
### 3.1.45 Former Tenant Arrears as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017



3.1.46 The overall outstanding arrears are £232k more than at the same point last year.

3.1.47 Unmanaged debt is £27k more than the same time last year, and the amount of unmanaged debt continues to remain consistently low.

### 3.1.48 Housing Benefit Overpayments Payments as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017



3.1.49 The overall outstanding arrears are £149k more than at the same point last year. This increase is in line with the national trend for overpayments and relates to the Department for Work and Pensions ongoing initiatives to identify overpayments. These two schemes, “Real Time Information” and “Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme”, are being fully supported in Northampton and the Council receives an incentive payment for the successful identification and reduction of error.

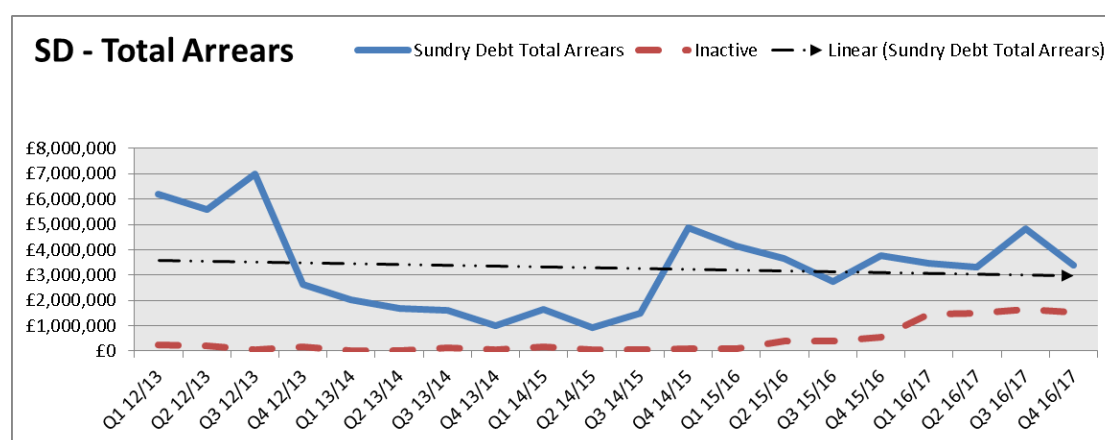
3.1.50 The current performance by our teams has reduced the impact on the Council of these new overpayments. By focusing resource on this debt has the team have supported better outcomes, which can be demonstrated by the reduction in the percentage of unmanaged debt. These debts remain very difficult to collect due to the limited recovery methods available to us, and the economic climate.

3.1.51 Unmanaged debt is £21k less than the same time last year, demonstrating that the Council is working hard to try to recover the outstanding monies.

3.1.52 The national Welfare Reform measures underway are increasing the pressure on individual debtors and their ability to pay debts. Housing benefit overpayments are deemed as a lower priority, as per the Corporate Debt policy, when compared to other debt types, and arrangements tend to be small amounts over a long period of time.

3.1.53 There has also been an increase in direct debit payers for this type of debt, but once again small amounts over a longer period of time.

3.1.54 Sundry Debts (SD) as at 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017



3.1.55 The overall outstanding arrears are £943k more than at the same point last year.

3.1.56 The unmanaged debt is £931k more than the same time last year. The majority of this is controlled within individual service areas in the Council. The unmanaged debt controlled by the Revenues and Benefits Service is 2.51%.

3.1.57 To allow some context around where the unmanaged debt is sitting within the council is detailed below.

	Level 4 Analysis (Number)			Level 4 Analysis (£)			Level 4 Analysis (%)		
	Managed	Unmanaged	Total	Managed	Unmanaged	Total	Managed	Unmanaged	Total
Asset Management	3	230	233	746	1,428,142	1,428,888	0.05%	99.95%	93.73%
Call Care	5	17	22	203	1,906	2,109	9.64%	90.36%	0.14%
Car Parks	1	25	26	648	52,499	53,147	1.22%	98.78%	3.49%
Environmental Health	0	13	13	0	2,995	2,995	0.00%	100.00%	0.20%
Exchequer Section	0	8	8	0	16,447	16,447	0.00%	100.00%	1.08%
Insurance	0	7	7	0	2,258	2,258	0.00%	100.00%	0.15%
Licensing	2	81	83	1,395	16,275	17,670	7.89%	92.11%	1.16%
Market Office	0	4	4	0	181	181	0.00%	100.00%	0.01%
Private Sector Housing	0	2	2	0	800	800	0.00%	100.00%	0.05%
Error on system	0	1	1	0	0	0	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	11	388	399	2,992	1,521,503	1,524,495	0.20%	99.80%	100.00%

3.1.58 Level 4 debt is debt that has received an invoice, reminder and a second reminder/final notice and the later stages of the recovery process is managed within the individual service areas.

3.1.59 A significant part (£1,080k) of the unmanaged debt in the asset management debt type relates to County Developments (Northampton) Ltd, which is currently part of the Council's on-going discussions with the Liquidators.

### **3.2 Issues**

3.2.1 The managed debt analysis and commentary to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017 contained within this report.

### **3.3 Choices (Options)**

3.3.1 None

## **4. Implications (including financial implications)**

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### **4.1 Policy**

4.1.1 There are no specific policy implications arising from this report.

### **4.2 Resources and Risk**

4.2.1 Ongoing monitoring of the Council's debt position enables early intervention and appropriate remedial action, thus mitigating risks to the Council's financial position and to its reputation.

### **4.3 Legal**

4.3.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

### **4.4 Equality**

4.4.1 There are no specific equalities implications arising from this report.

### **4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)**

4.5.1 None at this stage.

### **4.6 Other Implications**

4.6.1 Regular reporting of the Council's financial position helps to ensure the proper stewardship of the Council's resources. Active financial management contributes to the delivery of value for money services, enabling public money to be used to maximum benefit.

## **5. Background Papers**

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5.1.1 Not applicable

**Ian Tyrer, Revenues Manager, Extension 7451**

Appendix A	Half-yearly performance from 2012/13 to present by value of managed, unmanaged and total arrears									
YEAR on YEAR PERFORMANCE	2012/13		2013/14		2014/15		2015/16		2016/17	
	SEP	MAR	SEP	MAR	SEP	MAR	SEP	MAR	SEP	JAN
<b>TOTAL ARREARS</b>	<b>18,990,764</b>	<b>14,448,119</b>	<b>15,552,879</b>	<b>13,133,970</b>	<b>14,124,390</b>	<b>17,079,190</b>	<b>22,074,394</b>	<b>17,405,921</b>	<b>20,164,989</b>	<b>19,229,552</b>
Total Awaiting Action	889,537	635,627	686,348	578,997	499,008	580,064	552,182	1,084,977	1,924,839	2,007,073
Managed Debt	18,101,227	13,812,492	14,866,531	14,052,291	13,625,382	16,499,126	21,522,212	16,320,944	18,240,150	17,222,480
% unmanaged debt [PI]	<b>4.68%</b>	<b>4.40%</b>	<b>4.41%</b>	<b>4.41%</b>	<b>3.53%</b>	<b>3.40%</b>	<b>2.50%</b>	<b>6.23%</b>	<b>9.55%</b>	<b>10.44%</b>
<b>CTAX</b>	<b>6,748,461</b>	<b>6,090,189</b>	<b>7,430,390</b>	<b>6,281,511</b>	<b>7,664,327</b>	<b>6,053,552</b>	<b>7,857,713</b>	<b>6,280,780</b>	<b>8,167,738</b>	<b>7,154,718</b>
unmanaged debt	190,988	111,528	123,521	103,752	81,410	63,263	43,391	96,208	49,717	27,670
managed debt	6,557,474	5,978,660	7,306,869	6,177,759	7,582,917	5,990,289	7,814,322	6,184,572	8,118,021	7,127,048
unmanaged debt	<b>2.83%</b>	<b>1.83%</b>	<b>1.66%</b>	<b>1.65%</b>	<b>1.06%</b>	<b>1.05%</b>	<b>0.55%</b>	<b>1.53%</b>	<b>0.61%</b>	<b>0.39%</b>
<b>NNDR</b>	<b>1,454,169</b>	<b>776,782</b>	<b>1,162,504</b>	<b>543,491</b>	<b>407,858</b>	<b>568,644</b>	<b>830,958</b>	<b>807,217</b>	<b>1,777,515</b>	<b>1,847,464</b>
unmanaged debt	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
managed debt	1,454,169	776,782	1,162,504	543,491	407,858	568,644	830,958	807,217	1,777,515	1,847,464
unmanaged debt	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>
<b>FTA</b>	<b>1,101,424</b>	<b>814,503</b>	<b>886,670</b>	<b>784,750</b>	<b>557,708</b>	<b>328,049</b>	<b>573,762</b>	<b>435,545</b>	<b>773,435</b>	<b>716,744</b>
unmanaged debt	87,568	30,016	17,649	28,324	16,431	17,761	4,015	11,925	7,560	27,257
managed debt	1,013,856	784,487	869,021	756,426	541,277	310,288	569,747	423,620	765,875	689,487
unmanaged debt	<b>7.95%</b>	<b>3.69%</b>	<b>1.99%</b>	<b>3.61%</b>	<b>2.95%</b>	<b>5.41%</b>	<b>0.70%</b>	<b>2.74%</b>	<b>0.98%</b>	<b>3.80%</b>
<b>HBOP</b>	<b>4,090,115</b>	<b>4,122,698</b>	<b>4,381,953</b>	<b>4,515,411</b>	<b>4,555,039</b>	<b>5,243,926</b>	<b>5,645,801</b>	<b>6,094,450</b>	<b>6,127,991</b>	<b>6,107,644</b>
unmanaged debt	409,456	328,701	528,023	399,861	355,323.49	386,239	340,936	439,155	377,010	412,983
managed debt	3,680,659	3,793,997	3,853,930	4,115,550	4,199,716	4,857,687	5,304,865	5,655,295	5,750,982	5,694,661
unmanaged debt	<b>10.01%</b>	<b>7.97%</b>	<b>12.05%</b>	<b>8.86%</b>	<b>7.80%</b>	<b>7.37%</b>	<b>6.04%</b>	<b>7.21%</b>	<b>6.15%</b>	<b>6.76%</b>
<b>Sundry Debt</b>	<b>5,596,594</b>	<b>2,643,948</b>	<b>1,691,362</b>	<b>1,008,807</b>	<b>939,457.37</b>	<b>4,885,020</b>	<b>7,166,160</b>	<b>3,787,929</b>	<b>3,318,311</b>	<b>3,402,982</b>
unmanaged debt	201,526	165,382	17,155	47,060	45,844.00	112,802	163,839	537,689	1,490,553	1,539,163
managed debt	5,395,068	2,478,566	1,674,207	961,747	893,613	4,772,218	7,002,321	3,250,240	1,827,758	1,863,820
unmanaged debt	<b>3.60%</b>	<b>6.26%</b>	<b>1.01%</b>	<b>4.66%</b>	<b>4.88%</b>	<b>2.31%</b>	<b>2.29%</b>	<b>14.19%</b>	<b>44.92%</b>	<b>45.23%</b>