

PORTFOLIOS: HOUSING, CORPORATE & FINANCE

CABINET 1 DECEMBER 2004

GAS SERVICING CONTRACT – FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval for a change to the way that the servicing of gas appliances to the Council's housing stock is carried out.
- 1.2 The current servicing regime is undertaken by an external contractor at a cost of £310,000 per annum. The existing contract expires in March 2005.
- 1.3 The current arrangements for servicing appliances no longer comply with the minimum standards set by the Health and Safety Executive and recommended best practice by CORGI. This leaves Tenants at risk and the Council and officers vulnerable to potential claims and prosecution.
- 1.4 A higher standard of servicing therefore needs to be introduced from 1 April 2005 to ensure that appliances are maintained in accordance with manufacturers instructions. As a consequence the cost of carrying out this essential service will increase.
- 1.5 The Housing Landlord Service has had concerns over the performance of the existing contractor both in terms of its ability to complete the servicing work required by the required date, the standard of management information provided and its willingness to adopt closer partnership working with the Council.
- 1.6 In considering the options for the future officers believe that the creation of a new in-house team, consisting of a Housing Landlord Services employee and Building Works employees would provide the opportunity to deliver clear benefits to both Tenants and the Council.
- 1.7 Comparison of proposed future servicing and breakdown costs for an in-house team with those charged by other service providers indicates that the in-house team would be able to provide a cost effective service (Appendix 2).

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- 1.8 The total cost of servicing and breakdown works is estimated to be £608,000 in 2005/06 reducing to £574,000 in 2006/07, this assumes a significant reduction in the level of appliance breakdowns resulting from the improved servicing regime.
- 1.9 Funding for the additional costs associated with setting up an in-house team and undertaking servicing to current industry standards can be met from within existing HRA cyclical and planned maintenance budgets.
- 1.10 It is therefore proposed that a new gas servicing team, consisting of 6 CORGI qualified Gas Servicing engineers, together with supervisory and administrative support be established to carry out this work from 1 April 2005.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval for a change to the way that the servicing of gas appliances to the Council's housing stock is carried out. The report has been prepared jointly by Housing Landlord Services, Community Services Directorate and the Building Works Section, Commercial Services Directorate.
- 2.2 The Council through Housing Landlord Services has a responsibility to maintain the gas appliances to each of its council properties (5236 appliances, 4150 properties). The Gas Safety (Installation and use) Regulations 1998 require that all appliances are maintained in a safe condition and are checked and serviced annually.
- 2.3 The servicing of appliances is currently undertaken by an external contractor having been awarded the work through competitive tender from April 2000. The existing contract is due to expire on 31 March 2005. The service currently costs approximately £310,000 per annum, the split between servicing costs and breakdown costs is not currently identifiable within this sum.
- 2.4 There have been some concerns over the last few years regarding the ability of the existing contractor to undertake all of the servicing work by the required date and the standard of management information provided on completed work. Limited information has been provided on the condition of each gas heating system and the amount of work undertaken. This has resulted in the property database being incomplete therefore making future expenditure planning decisions difficult. Despite concerted efforts to encourage closer partnership working with the contractor the current relationship falls some way short of that now needed by the Housing Landlord team. There is also concern that the external contractor is unable to utilise the property database used by Housing.
- 2.5 The management information provided by the contractor also suggests that there is currently a high level of reactive work involved in responding to breakdowns, with 4152 incidents reported in 2003/04. This would appear high against the total number of appliances (5236) and may suggest an underlying problem with the way that appliances are being maintained.

- 2.6 The specification for work within the current contract requires that appliances are tested for operational efficiency and repairs undertaken if necessary. The testing is undertaken by placing a probe in the appliance to check burning efficiency. Only if this fails is any service or repair undertaken. This is a much quicker process than that of undertaking a full strip down service.
- 2.7 The current maintenance arrangements no longer meet the minimum standards required by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and recommended best practice by CORGI. The HSE have issued guidance stating that the use of probes should not be used as an alternative to normal services undertaken in accordance with manufacturers instructions. As a consequence tenants are left at risk to the failure of appliances, the Council and individual officers vulnerable to potential claims and prosecution and the likelihood that resources are not being utilised to best effect.
- 2.8 Officers have therefore reviewed the future requirements for gas servicing prior to deciding on the best way to commission the services from 1 April 2005.

3. PROPOSALS

- 3.1 The future service must seek to ensure that the Housing Landlord duties comply with minimum legislative requirements and conform to industry best practice. As a minimum this will require that all appliances receive a full service annually. Whoever undertakes the work must be able to demonstrate that this has been achieved to the required standard. There will clearly be cost implications for the service as this is a higher level of service than is currently specified or provided. The service provider will also need to have resources available to respond to the current high level of breakdowns. These breakdowns should start to reduce as the programme of annual services progresses.
- 3.2 The service therefore needs to be able to demonstrate value for money, this includes providing servicing and maintenance in an efficient manner, demonstrating quality in the work done and maintaining accurate up to date information on the condition of it's domestic gas systems.
- 3.3 Pressures on the Housing reactive and planned maintenance budgets are starting to impact on the range of work undertaken for Housing by the Councils in-house Building Works Section. Opportunities therefore need to be identified to diversify into other areas of activity if the Council wishes to maintain an efficient and responsive Building Works Section. The Section currently undertakes reactive repairs for half of the housing stock. It also undertakes the testing of smoke alarms to all of the housing stock, a new arrangement that commenced in 04/05 having been moved back in-house from an external contractor. Both reactive maintenance work and smoke detector inspections are now undertaken by pre-arranged appointment organised by the Building Works Section.

The gas servicing work whilst being a valuable addition to the sections turnover also has close synergies with existing work, particularly where appointments are required.

- 3.4 Many other local authorities, faced with similar issues, have set up their own gas servicing teams and taken work back in-house from external contractors. Visits and discussions have taken place with Bournemouth Borough Council and Nottingham City Council to establish what needs to be done to set up and deliver this type of service with an in-house team. Both Councils have a proven track record of delivering high quality servicing work in house. Much has been learned from their experiences both from an operational and financial point of view.
- 3.5 What is clear from the research undertaken to date is that an essential element of a successful transfer is that any new arrangement should be set up as a single team, combining the resources of the in-house team with those of Housing Landlord Services to facilitate closer working relationships, good day to day communications and efficiencies in the stewardship of the service. Any proposal will therefore need to adopt this approach with the Housing Inspector currently responsible for managing the gas servicing contract being an integral element of the new team.
- 3.6 Taking all of the above factors into account it is therefore proposed that the gas appliance servicing work is undertaken by a newly formed in-house team from 1 April 2005.
- 3.7 Advice from CORGI has been sought as to what steps the Council would have to take to set up a new team and to acquire CORGI accreditation. CORGI have confirmed that they would be able to 'hand hold' the Council through the initial set up process, something that they have done at many other Local Authorities. After the initial set up process an annual audit would be required to ensure that procedures are being followed.
- 3.8 The Construction, Design and Management Regulations (CDM Regs) require that clients ensure that they are employing a competent contractor. Whilst any newly established team would not be classified as a contractor in the traditional sense, the Housing Landlord Service would still have to be assured that the new team was competent to satisfy the requirements of the CDM Regs. A new team would not have any experience of delivering gas servicing on the scale proposed. Therefore it should be noted that if there was an incident the HSE would closely examine the evidence for choosing to deliver the service in-house. Officers are confident that the use of CORGI as consultants and their subsequent approval of internal procedures will demonstrate a competent approach to the work and will minimise any future risk of criticism from the HSE.
- 3.9 The proposed new team would consist of 6 CORGI qualified Gas Servicing Engineers managed and supported by a full time supervisor and clerical assistant together with the existing Housing Inspector currently responsible for the service. The cost of this structure would be fully funded by the annual sum for undertaking the work which will

be paid for from the existing HRA planned and reactive maintenance budgets. The Housing Landlord service would still retain overall responsibility for the service with its landlord responsibilities being fulfilled by the Housing Inspector.

- 3.10 It is possible that there may be a TUPE transfer of Gas Servicing engineers currently employed by the existing contractor. Preliminary discussions have taken place with the existing contractor.
- 3.11 The team will need to be capable of responding and adapting to peaks and troughs in workloads. The establishment identified in 3.9 is the minimum required to undertake the expected workload. Contact has therefore been made with an external contractor and an agency and arrangements made for assistance during peaks of activity should it be required.
- 3.12 Setting up a team to undertake this new area of work is clearly a major project. The lead in time to be ready to commence on 1 April 2005 is short. Preparations would have to commence immediately, with expenditure in 2004/05, if agreement was reached to transfer this work in-house. The existing contractor has indicated its willingness to continue undertaking servicing work to the current standard for a short period after the expiry of the existing contract if necessary, to facilitate the formation of the new team.

4. BENEFITS

- 4.1 There are many benefits that will accrue if the servicing work is brought back in house:
 - The authority will have certainty that the new servicing regime is compliant with statutory requirements and industry best practice.
 - Operating on an open book basis the Housing Revenue Account will only be recharged for the actual cost of the work. The Building Works Section is required to operate at break even for all internal work.
 - The Council will not be tied in to an annual contract sum for 5 years. As the work progresses and anticipated operational efficiencies are achieved as well as a reduction in breakdown work any savings will be returned to the HRA rather than being retained by a contractor as profit.
 - Where practicable the gas servicing work will be integrated with other work undertaken by the section (e.g. Smoke Detector checking) resulting in reduced travelling time, cost savings and single appointments with tenants for multiple jobs. It is estimated that savings in the region of £5,000 (12%) could be achieved on the Smoke Detector works.
 - The existing reactive maintenance appointments system could be used for this area of work.

- More flexible shift patterns for new Gas Servicing engineers would enable appointments to be made during the early evening and at weekends (feedback from tenants has indicated this to be a service improvement priority).
- Improvement in the collection, recording and use of management information relating to individual properties to ensure property data is accurate and up to date (Building Works Section use the same database of housing properties).
- Self monitoring will reduce the level of on site landlord supervision required (Current annual cost of independent check by Zurich is £6,400). Closer working relationship between Inspector and rest of team will assist in identifying and developing service improvements and in monitoring the condition of appliances.
- Improved basis for informing future expenditure planning decisions.
- Future maintenance of information in electronic form with automatic transfer to the Housing Orchard system.
- More efficient use of existing plumbers to undertake associated heating system repairs that do not require fully qualified CORGI engineers, e.g. radiator replacements, leaks, pipe repairs (estimate that 30% by value of breakdowns relate to plumbing work).

5. DEMONSTRATION OF VALUE FOR MONEY

- 5.1 A key factor in deciding whether the proposal should be approved is the ability of the in-house team to demonstrate that a cost effective service can be provided when compared to other service providers.
- 5.2 A detailed analysis and estimate of costs associated with this work has been completed (Appendix 1). This has been prepared in the format required by Housing if the work was to be subject to formal competitive tender. Costs have been separated out between standard servicing costs (including the cost of repairs identified at service) and the cost of responding to and dealing with appliance breakdowns.
- 5.3 A newly established in-house team would be able to provide the servicing work for an annual sum of £375,032. This equates to £71.63 per appliance or £90.13 per property as some properties have more than one appliance. This includes the cost of materials, parts and labour used as a result of the normal service.
- 5.4 These costs compare favourably with unit costs from other service providers (LA's and Private contractors) Appendix 2. In drawing direct comparisons it should be noted however that specifications for service standards and charging mechanisms vary considerably between service providers.

- 5.5 A national benchmarking exercise undertaken in 2000 for 260 Housing Associations and Local Authorities into housing repairs and maintenance has analysed the average cost of gas servicing. Results indicate that costs range from between £70 - £80 per service depending upon whether a fixed or non-fixed price arrangement is in place with the service provider. This is consistent with the proposed new charge from 2005. The proposed cost for servicing work is therefore considered reasonable by the Housing Landlord team.
- 5.6 Whilst undertaking the comparison, a number of key issues that effect service costs have been identified, as follows:
- The cost of servicing and breakdown work is greatly influenced by the initial condition of appliances and the standard of previous appliance servicing.
 - In those LA's where the work has been taken back in-house, significant cost savings / efficiencies start to accrue after 2-3 years when system reliability improves and standardisation of appliances has been achieved.
 - Costs are directly influenced by the property portfolio (high / low density) and geographical location (dispersed or concentrated).
- 5.7 The assessment of the current cost of breakdown work required has proved more difficult to establish. From the information provided by the existing contractor there would appear to be a high level of call outs recorded each year (4,152) for 5236 appliances. The high level of recorded incidents may result from:
- Inaccurate information supplied by the existing contractor relating to these call outs, some of which may be for works undertaken during a test rather than a separate breakdown.
 - The previous testing / servicing arrangements failing to maintain the systems to manufacturers recommended standards.
 - The quality of work undertaken by the existing contractor
 - The absence of an informed programme of replacements for ageing systems.
- 5.8 The first year of undertaking this work will undoubtedly require an element of catch up in terms of determining the overall state of repair of each system and as a consequence the bringing of all appliances up to an acceptable standard of serviceability. These costs need to be factored into the overall cost of breakdowns. It is anticipated that as the programme of servicing rolls out across the housing stock the level of repairs will reduce and as a consequence so will overall costs. The rate at which this improvement will be achieved is difficult to assess until work actually commences.

- 5.9 Breakdown costs for the first full year of works have been estimated to be £233,697. Based on a review of current data it has been assessed that a reduction of approximately 40% in the level of call outs compared with the 2003/04 statistics is achievable. On this basis the average cost per breakdown is approximately £95.97.
- 5.10 Assuming that after the first year breakdowns reduce by a further 10% on the 2003/04 level this could reduce the breakdown costs still further to nearer £200,000 per annum. It is however difficult to provide firm estimates of potential reductions until the work commences and the state of appliances becomes clear.
- 5.11 Included in the costings for both servicing and breakdown works is a sum of £27,000 for contingencies. This has been included to cover items such as the engagement of external resources to cover peaks in workload, a safety net for the unknown type and level of breakdowns to be encountered, possible future acquisition of ICT software and hardware to enable engineers to access information remotely and other unforeseen or unpredictable future costs. Should part or all of this sum not be required it will be returned to the HRA and reallocated for other purposes.
- 5.12 Because of the uncertainty over the level and cost of breakdown works it is proposed that these works are charged for on an agreed schedule of rates. In this way the Housing Landlord Service is only charged for the cost of actual work undertaken. Clearly there would have to be controls in place to regulate the level of charges being made.
- 5.13 In order to ensure that close control is maintained of the overall cost of call out work it is proposed that a ceiling be placed on the annual value of works undertaken. Expenditure would then be monitored against the budget with any underspends being reallocated to other reactive or planned works e.g. Replacement Boiler Schemes. In the event of a projected overspend, formal approval would be sought prior to committing expenditure above the original budget. It is proposed that the budget for the first year is set at £250,000 and that in future years, if practicable, would be reduced by an agreed amount and would represent a key performance target for the in-house team.
- 5.14 It is further proposed that a bi annual review be undertaken to ensure that the cost of all works (servicing and breakdowns) remain competitive and the anticipated efficiencies identified in this report are delivered.
- 5.15 A robust system of performance management will also be implemented to ensure the delivery of a high standard service. This will be underpinned by a comprehensive set of key performance indicators that will be developed jointly by the team and reported on a monthly basis.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The costs referred to in 5.3 and 5.9 result in an estimated annual sum of £608,000 for the whole of the works (servicing and breakdowns). Whilst this does represent a significant increase on current costs it should be noted that the specification of works is fundamentally different to that currently required of the existing contractor and that if the works were to be formally offered to external contractors through competitive tender costs would inevitably rise to a similar or higher level.
- 6.2 After the first year of works this could reduce to £574,000 dependant on the actual reduction in breakdowns achieved as a result of the improved servicing regime.
- 6.3 The cost of annual servicing (£375,000) has been allowed for within the future cyclical maintenance programmes as it was known that costs would rise to at least this level.
- 6.4 The cost of breakdown works (£233,000) will be funded from anticipated savings in the replacement heating programme, a reduction in future garage refurbishments and the external decorating programmes.
- 6.5 A major benefit of carrying the works out in-house will be that the current overheads of the Building Works Section will be spread over a wider operational base. As a consequence the Gas Servicing team will make a contribution in the region of £80,000 to the recovery of overheads and will thus reduce the cost of works in other service areas, the reduction being split between the Housing Revenue Account (75%) and the General Fund (25%).
- 6.6 Providing this service in-house enables efficiencies to be delivered on the testing of smoke detector works. Annual savings of £5,000 will be achieved through the integration of this work with the gas servicing work.
- 6.7 Costs of £6,400 are currently incurred by the Housing Landlord Service for an independent check of maintenance work. A reduced level of checking would be required if the work were undertaken in-house and to the CORGI approved standards. CORGI would undertake an annual inspection for the sum of £2,400, a saving of £4,000 on current costs.
- 6.8 It is proposed that the new team would operate on a break even basis with any surpluses or deficits being returned to the HRA.
- 6.9 Initial set up costs would be incurred prior to the works commencing that would need to be covered separately from the costs identified in 6.1 and 6.2. The costs, amounting to approximately £50,000 relate to:
 - Recruitment and salary costs of supervisory, administrative and gas servicing employees taken on prior to the start of the work to set up systems and procedures. (It is planned that the supervisor

and admin support would be in post from 1 January 2005 and the Gas Service engineers in post from 1 March 2005)

- Vehicle costs
- CORGI accreditation fees
- Purchase of equipment (Office furniture, PC's and printers, testing equipment, servicing manuals, materials etc)

6.10 These costs will be incurred in 2004/05 and will be funded through the HRA from savings in the current 2004/05 planned maintenance programme or from HRA reserves.

7. TENANTS COMMENTS

7.1 The Tenants consultative Group listened and have agreed broadly with the proposal and acknowledge that the short term expense of bringing the gas maintenance back under Council control will have long term benefit.

8. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS COMMENTS

8.1 Clearly there is a level of concern as to the efficiency of the current contracted out arrangement. Given the importance of ensuring that there is no compromise in respect of safety in this area, I consider this proposal addresses a number of concerns that have been apparent for some time. This in house system would ensure that we have direct knowledge of the maintenance regime and subject to the Tenants Consultative Group being consulted on the funding from the HRA, I consider this in house proposal is the appropriate way forward

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Better programming and achievement of servicing will result in appliances operating more efficiently, thereby reducing the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted and a reduction in the quantity of gas used.

9.2 The integration of the servicing work with existing smoke detector checks and other reactive maintenance work will result in reduced travelling for operational employees.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER

10.1 There are no crime and disorder implications.

11. CONCLUSIONS

11.1 To comply with more stringent health and safety regulations the Housing Landlord Service needs to introduce an improved level of servicing of its domestic gas appliances. These improvements will result in significant additional costs which will have to be borne by the

HRA. These increases in cost will accrue whether the work is delivered by a newly created in-house team or an external contractor.

- 11.2 There are clear advantages to be derived from bringing the work in-house as set out in section 4.
- 11.3 Officers therefore believe that it is in the Councils and Tenants best interests to set up a new in-house team to manage and undertake the servicing and ongoing maintenance of Council owned gas appliances.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 12.1 That Cabinet approve the proposal to undertake the servicing of gas appliances in the Council's housing stock through the creation of a new in-house gas servicing team from 1 April 2005, the team to consist of a Gas Servicing Supervisor, a Clerical Assistant and 6 Gas Servicing Engineers.

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Background Papers:

None

APPENDIX 1

SUMMARY BUILD UP OF SERVICING AND BREAKDOWN COSTS

	SERVICING £	BREAKDOWNS £	TOTAL £
Labour and Vehicles	238,855	119,140	357,995
Materials	98,814	83,456	182,270
Preliminaries <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supervision• Admin• Testing equip• Training	40,520	24,311	64,831
Contingency	16,883	10,130	27,013
Sub Total	395,072	237,037	632,109
Less CO detectors	20,040	3,340	23,380
Grand Total	375,032	233,697	608,729

Cost per appliance (5236 No)	£71.63		
Cost per property (4150 No)	£90.37		
Cost per breakdown (2435 No)		£95.97	
Total cost per property (4150 No)			£146.68

APPENDIX 2

COMPARISON OF SERVICING COSTS WITH OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS

ORGANISATION	ANNUAL SERVICE CHARGE PER APPLIANCE	ALL INCLUSIVE CHARGE PER PROPERTY (Incl. breakdowns)	ADDITIONAL BREAKDOWN CHARGE	SCHEDULE OF RATES CHARGE	REPLACEMENT SYSTEM CHARGE	TOTAL NO OF PROPERTIES	COMMENT
New Forest DC	£72	£146	No	Yes	Yes	4,150	Allowance of approx. £10 for materials / parts included in normal servicing work (05/06 price) All labour costs included. Estimated annual cost for full service and breakdown cover £146.
Nottingham CC	£91	£136 (£91+ 45 for 'wet work')	No	Yes	Yes	26,500	In 8 th year of work being carried out in-house. Average cost of service, excludes charge for wet work (£1.2m per annum, additional £45.28 per property)
Gosport BC	-	£150	Open book charge	Open book charge	Yes	4,000	Tendered 03/04, work awarded to private contractor, strong emphasis on partnering, sophisticated IT system in place (engineers have hand held computers to record work completed). Allowance of £50.00 included in price for sundry repairs when servicing.

ORGANISATION	ANNUAL SERVICE CHARGE PER APPLIANCE	ALL INCLUSIVE CHRG PER PROPERTY (Incl. breakdowns)	ADDITIONAL BREAKDOWN CHARGE	SCHEDULE OF RATES CHARGE	REPLACEMENT SYSTEM CHARGE	TOTAL NO OF PROPERTIES	COMMENT
Bournemouth BC	£40 (excludes parts & associated labour)	£130 – £150 (incl. parts, labour & other work)	Yes	Yes	Yes	3,600	In 7 th year of work carried out in-house. Cost of basic service for property excluding any parts or repairs £40 (i.e. strip down, clean, put back). Policy of undertaking any other work identified at same time as servicing visit. Average overall cost of a 'visit' running at between £130-150. Based on systems being in good repair and in-house team undertaking replacement boiler works. (04/05 price).
Southampton CC	£35	£70 est (cost of wet work unknown, no allowance made)	£35	Yes (for wet work)	Yes	10,000	In 9 th year of work being carried out in-house. Took 3 years to achieve level of service cost that stood up to benchmarking comparison. High density housing (Tower blocks) realise efficiency savings (travelling time, admin, consistency of appliance).
Test Valley BC	£80	£80 (excludes wet work)	No	Yes	Yes	250	Price is for boiler only and excludes wet work. Appliances are domestic boilers in commercial buildings. No access or system abuse problems. Contractor appointed through competitive tender.
Checkmate benchmarking club	£70 (fixed price) £80 (Non fixed price)	-	-	-	-	-	Benchmarking exercise undertaken by M3 Housing, KPMG, Nat Hsg Mtce Forum. 260 RSL's & HA's participated. Average prices for servicing work only on fixed and non fixed price basis.

ORGANISATION	ANNUAL SERVICE CHARGE PER APPLIANCE	ALL INCLUSIVE CHARGE PER PROPERTY (Incl. breakdowns)	ADDITIONAL BREAKDOWN CHARGE	SCHEDULE OF RATES CHARGE	REPLACEMENT SYSTEM CHARGE	TOTAL NO OF PROPERTIES	COMMENT
Housing Association 1	N/A	£200	Over £200 pay difference	Over £200 pay difference	No	3,000	Unique pricing structure
Housing Association 2	N/A	£100	No	-	-	8,000	In 10 th year of work being carried out in-house. Generally new housing stock and therefore newer, standardised, more reliable gas appliances. HA considering changing pricing structure.
Further Education College	£60	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	350	Price excludes charge for travelling time.
British Gas	-	£228	No	Yes	Yes	-	Conditional servicing and breakdown cover, charge based on pre inspection to confirm age / standard of appliance.
CORGI	Between £60 - £200	-	-	-	-	-	Market information provided by CORGI. Range of costs reflects different specifications for servicing.
Contractor A	£125 (per property)	-	-	-	-	-	Recently tendered price at a neighbouring Local Authority (Contractor identity withheld).

Key	
-	Information not available

