

Present: Councillor Ray Cucksey, Councillor Nikki Dillon,
Councillor Rosanne Kirk and Councillor
Donald Nannestad

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Ric Metcalfe

1. Election of Chair

It was proposed, seconded and RESOLVED that Councillor Ray Cucksey be elected Chair of the Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee for the 2019/20 municipal year.

[Councillor Ray Cucksey in the Chair]

It was proposed, seconded and RESOLVED that Councillor Nikki Dillon be elected Vice-Chair of the Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee for the 2019/20 municipal year.

2. Confirmation of Minutes - 19 February 2019

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 19 February 2019 be confirmed.

3. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

4. Welfare Team Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an update on the activity undertaken and the outcomes achieved by the Welfare Advisers in the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The Welfare Team offered two distinct but closely linked services, noted as benefits advice and money advice. The benefits advice service offered a help-desk facility during Council opening times and was effectively a duty officer who was available to answer customers' enquiries, book appointments and home visits, calculate individual entitlement to means-tested benefits and see drop-in customers if necessary. The money advice side of the service was operated under the administrative auspices of Community Money Advice and was regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority which required that there was a

clear and distinct separation between the line management of staff who were responsible for the collection of income. As a result of this requirement the Welfare Team reported to the Customer Services Manager at the City of Lincoln Council.

The report provided an overview of the 2018/19 financial year which highlighted that the team had dealt with 7,326 customers for benefit related queries. This was a marked increase of the previous 12 months when the total was 5,484.

In the year 2018/19 the team issued a total of 505 food vouchers for local community larders and food banks and, in line with the national trend, this was a big increase on the previous year's total of 306.

Additional benefits claimed by customers who had sought the advice and assistance of the Welfare Team were set out in paragraph 4.5 of the report and the total value of additional income paid over 52 weeks for both districts in the Shared Service equated to a weekly value of £3,302,533 compared to £2,988,383.84 in the previous financial year.

In addition to the weekly amounts of benefit awarded to individuals, in many cases customers had backdated awards or lump-sum payments, which were outlined in paragraph 4.7 of the report. This equated to £383,570.97 for 2018/19 compared to £393,742.98 in the previous year.

In terms of money advice casework, in 2018/19 the team received 263 referrals for money advice, compared to 272 in the previous year. This slight reduction may be explained by the budgeting supported offered to some clients as part of the Universal Credit Support Project Team. The total debt managed for 2018/19 equated to £979,815.72 for the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven. The previous year's total debt for both areas was £1,323,356.87. The Chair requested a further breakdown split between private tenants and council tenants for each local authority area. It was agreed that this information would be included in future reports to the Joint Committee.

The team worked on the basis of agile working, which provided flexibility and meant that a lot of work was done in customers' homes. Due to the urban character of Lincoln compared to the rural nature of North Kesteven, more home visits were undertaken in a day in Lincoln than they were in North Kesteven. It was reported that this was working very well. A question was raised as to whether pop-up sessions could be held in other areas across North Kesteven which people could then attend should they have difficulties visiting the office in Sleaford. It was reported that pop-up sessions had been held previously in areas such as Metheringham, but unfortunately people very rarely attended them. It was therefore agreed that the offer of home visits was a more effective way of providing support to those who required it.

A question was raised as to whether any support by way of accompaniment or representation was provided to customers should they be required to attend a hearing as a result of an appeal. It was reported that the team would provide assistance with the completion and submission of paperwork, however, it did not have the resources to be able to accompany or represent people at appeal hearings. This was something that Citizens Advice was sometimes able to offer, although it was acknowledged that Citizens Advice also had limited resources.

5. Performance Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an update on performance in the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

Updates were noted as follows:

Council Tax

Positive Council Tax in-year collection had been achieved for 2018/19 with the City of Lincoln achieving 96.76% and North Kesteven achieving 99.08%. Although Council Tax in-year collection levels had reduced slightly for both authorities, the City of Lincoln by 0.41% and North Kesteven by 0.12%, these were still positive outturns considering factors such as the economic climate, cumulative impacts of national welfare reforms and Council Tax Support Schemes. In addition, it should be noted that the net collectable debit for both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven increased from 2017/18 by £2.57 million and £3.75 million respectively. Paragraph 4.3 of the report showed an overview of performance since the commencement of the Shared Service in 2011/12.

Business Rates

As with Council Tax, positive Business Rates in-year collection had been achieved for 2018/19 with the City of Lincoln achieving 99.81%, North Kesteven 99.42% and West Lindsey 98.63%. Paragraph 4.4 of the report showed an overview of performance since the commencement of the Shared Service in 2011/12.

It was noted that the total net collectable debit had also increased from 2017/18 by £646,000 for the City of Lincoln, £928,000 for North Kesteven and £757,000 for West Lindsey.

It was noted that the service had received a 32% increase in monthly emails, a 13% increase in monthly telephone calls and a 27% increase in the monthly submission of e-forms since the previous financial year and represented a significant increase for staff.

Outstanding Revenues Customers

The number of outstanding revenues customers at the end of quarter four 2018/19 showed an overall increase from the last two financial years, however, this was still a positive position. The workload was up to date going into new year billing, however, an influx of documents during the billing period from early-mid

March created the increased figure at the end of the financial year. Also, in the Council Tax base there were now an additional 1,051 properties to administer between the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven. Staffing resources on the Council Tax team being reduced at points throughout the year due to unforeseen circumstances had also been a key contributor. A table set out in paragraph 4.8 of the report set out performance for each year from 2012.

Although there had been a successful rollout of several e-forms in the revenues team, these had not yet resulted in a reduction of incoming work through other customer channels. Officers were carefully analysing demands across the shared service and resources required to maintain and improve performance.

Housing Benefit Overpayments

The table at paragraph 4.11 of the report showed in-period collection rates over the last seven financial years. The City of Lincoln achieved a rate of 100.38% in 2018/19 and North Kesteven achieved a rate of 107.45%.

Benefits Performance

The table at paragraph 5.1 showed the number of outstanding benefits customers awaiting assessment at the end of each financial year since the formation of the shared service.

The figure for the City of Lincoln was 897 in 2019 and the figure for North Kesteven was 502. Although the overall position was not quite as positive as at the end of the last two financial years, this was still a much improved position compared to other financial years. It was noted that the rollout of Universal Credit Full Service in Lincoln and Sleaford JobCentre Plus had placed significant increased processing demands on the benefits assessment team.

Information setting out housing benefit average processing times for new claims and changes in circumstances was set out at paragraph 5.2 of the report. Changes in circumstances performance remained positive, however, there had been slippage in new claims performance for both partner authorities. A number of factors associated with this slippage included:

- unforeseen reductions in staffing resources;
- delays in rent information being provided for a number of properties;
- the introduction of the 'e-benefits' self-serve application form;
- the clearing of older work which increased the overall average processing figures.

The latest statistics for the City of Lincoln up to April was 25.04 days, with North Kesteven achieving 25.28 days.

Universal Credit was having an impact on processing times due to the number of Universal Credit related documents requiring processing, as well as officers awaiting Universal Credit related decisions before putting housing benefit into payment in some cases. Officers had a proactive action plan in place aiming to improve processing times in 2019/20, a copy of which was appended to the report.

The accuracy of claims was an important factor and the table set out at paragraph 5.3 of the report outlined the outcomes of claims checked under the quality checking regime. The figure for the City of Lincoln was 86% and was 96% for North Kesteven. It was noted that even if a claim was only 1p out, this would be recorded as being incorrect. Figures for April were reported as 94% for the City of Lincoln and 100% for North Kesteven. Further clarity was requested in future reports to make it clear how many accuracy checks had actually been undertaken.

Discussion ensued on the commitment of both authorities towards a channel shift from traditional methods of communication to more electronic forms of communication and submission of documentation. Councillor Nikki Dillon expressed concerns in that some residents were not confident or comfortable using the internet to submit forms and in some instances would not have access to a computer or facility to enable them to submit information in this manner. It was reported that the welfare support team would support residents in the completion of this information over the telephone, for example, and submit the necessary paperwork on behalf of the customer. Councillor Dillon requested that copies of the benefit application forms be sent to her, which the Head of the Shared Service agreed to do.

6. Financial Outturn 2018/19

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with the financial outturn for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service for 2018/19.

Decision

That the report be noted and the budget adjustments as set out in paragraph 3.2 of the report be approved.

Alternation Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The approved budget for 2018/19 was agreed by the Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee on 20 February 2018 which set a budget of £2,285,710 for the service. This had since been increased after receipt of New Burdens Grants, totalling £262,645, but had been subsequently revised to reflect further receipt of New Burdens Grants notified to each authority in quarter four as set out in paragraph 3.2 of the report, totalling £29,506.

The financial performance quarterly monitoring report for the third quarter predicted an underspend of £165,248 against the revised budget, after taking into account New Burdens Grants. The 2018/19 financial outturn for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service resulted in an underspend of £214,405, a variance of 8.4% of the revised budget. The main year-end variations against the approved budget for 2018/19 were noted as follows:

- salaries, which encompassed vacant hours together with career graded posts budgeted at the top of scale when all officers were not at the top of the scale;
- New Burdens Grants;
- IT costs, the cost of upgrading the Northgate system;
- printing;
- agency staff, to cover vacant roles in the service;
- postage;
- subscriptions.

With regard to New Burdens Grant funding, it was reported that this was extremely difficult to budget for as it was usually received as a one-off payment part way through a financial year, with no sufficient notice of how much it was likely to be for or how many payments would be made throughout the year.

It was proposed that a significant proportion of the underspend be carried forward to 2019/20 as agreed at the previous meeting of the Joint Committee. Following consideration and agreement through each partner Council's end of year financial procedures, both partner authorities had agreed to carry-forward £45,000 each.

7. Housing Benefit Overpayments Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an update on the recovery of housing benefit overpayments.

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

As a result of the review undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions' Performance Development Team, the team provided officers with a report detailing findings and recommendations as considered at the last meeting of this Committee. These findings formed the Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery Action Plan which had been used during 2018/19 to ensure the team undertook recommended actions to improve recovery of these overpayments. The action plan had been used as a working document and provided the team with a clear direction for the work which had now become business as usual within the team. An update on the key actions was set out at paragraph 5.2 of the report.

As part of the formation of the housing benefit overpayment project, it was reported that the recovery methods available for all stages of debt had been broken down as follows:

- overpayments recovered from ongoing housing benefit;
- overpayments at sundry debtors less than four months old;
- overpayments at sundry debtors over four months old;
- write off.

A question was raised as to why there was a four month threshold. It was reported that the four month threshold was recommended by the Department for Work and Pensions, although a number of attempts would be made up to that point to make contact with the individual and amicably agree a way forward to arrange repayment.

The table at paragraph 6.2 of the report showed the improvements for 2018/19 in respect of both partner authorities since the project commenced in June 2018. Total overpayments outstanding had reduced by £676,968 since the project started. £463,353 of this was for the City of Lincoln and £213,615 was for North Kesteven.

It was reported that the housing benefit overpayment team would continue to review housing benefit overpayments and recovery during 2019/20.

8. Business Rates Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an update on current issues with non-domestic rates.

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The following updates were noted:

Supporting Small Business Relief Scheme – 2017/18 to 2020/21

This relief was made available to those ratepayers who faced a large increase as a result of the loss of small business or rural rate relief. The number of hereditaments that had been identified for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and had benefitted from the scheme as at 30 April 2019 for the City of Lincoln, North Kesteven and West Lindsey was set out in the report at paragraph 4.1.

Discretionary Relief Scheme

The table under paragraph 4.2 of the report showed the number of accounts identified and the total cost of relief for all three years for comparison purposes. Two amendments to the total award columns for the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven in 2018/19 were reported at the meeting as £95,864 and £90,816 respectively.

A review of the awards would take place in July and any additional awards would be made prior to the annual deadline of 30 September 2019. It was noted that this was a discretionary relief which the local authority was compensated for.

Retail Discount

Eligibility criteria had been provided to local authorities in response to the inclusion of a discount for retail properties in the 2018 autumn budget, in recognition that high streets and town centres were crucial parts of communities and local economies. Local authorities would be reimbursed using a grant under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 for this purpose.

Retail discount awarded for 2019/20 for each of the three authorities was set out in paragraph 4.3 of the report. It was agreed that the latest figures relating to retail relief would be circulated to members in due course.

Business Rate Pilot – 100% Business Rates Retention in 2018/19 – 75% in 2019/20

Based on the unaudited NNDR3's submitted by each of the Lincolnshire pilot authorities, the additional resources generated between being the previous pool arrangement and being in a pilot was outlined in the table at paragraph 5.2 of the report and equated to £30,274,000.

Although the pilot bids were only awarded for a one year period, the 2018/19 Local Government Finance Settlement promised a further round of new pilots in 2019/20. Following consideration by Chief Executives and Section 151 Officers, a bid for 2019/20 pilot status, based on the existing pilot authorities, was submitted in September 2018. As part of the bid submission a request was made to form a Lincolnshire business rate pool should the 100% business rate bid not be approved. Unfortunately the bid was not successful and therefore the Lincolnshire pool had been re-established from 1 April 2019.

Recent Court of Appeal Decision – Automated Transaction Machines

Details relating to a Court of Appeal decision regarding business rates associated with automated transaction machines at supermarkets was set out within the report. On 10 December 2018, the Valuation Office Agency submitted an application for the right of appeal to the Court of Appeals ruling. Information received by officers indicated that the Supreme Court may take up until June 2019 to decide whether to hear the case, adding a further 18 months to two years before a further decision was likely to be made.

This continued to have implications for local authorities as automated transaction machines were now included as an appeal threat and provision would need to be made for potential refunds. In answer to a question, it was acknowledged that it would be the responsibility of local authorities to meet the cost of any potential refunds. A table showing the potential financial impact would be provided at the next meeting of this Committee.

Discussion ensued on the subject of growth relief and it was agreed that future reports would include updates on growth relief for the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven.

9. Universal Credit Support Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an update with regard to Universal Credit support, particularly in respect of arrangements for 2019/20.

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

As part of a central government decision for Citizens Advice to deliver Universal Credit support for the financial year 2019/20, Citizens Advice was contracted to deliver a new regime of Universal Credit support arrangements from 1 April 2019 known as 'Help to Claim'. These arrangements were to support Universal Credit customers with a focus on digital assistance up to and including first payment of Universal Credit only. Therefore, the contracted arrangement did not cover the wide range of activities delivered by the Shared Service's Universal Credit Support Team as outlined in paragraph 3.3 of the report.

Mid-Lincolnshire Citizens Advice, which included a Sleaford based office, progressed Help to Claim arrangements to be in place from 1 April 2019. In addition to this a Sleaford based Universal Credit support function from the Shared Service for 2019/20 would be retained with a review to take place in advance of 2020/21 with the potential to extend for a subsequent year. This effectively continued the Universal Credit support function already provided at North Kesteven offices in Sleaford, co-located with Jobcentre Plus. However, key links and communication with Citizens Advice was crucial to ensure effective referrals with the initial Help to Claim being delivered from Citizens Advice in Sleaford.

Arrangements had been put in place for the Universal Credit Support Team based in Lincoln to continue support arrangements for the period 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2019 to allow Lincoln and District Citizens Advice to recruit and have supported training, with the aim of achieving a successful revised arrangement from 1 July 2019. There remained key risks around matters such as rent arrears, council tax support, discretionary housing payment and rent issues. Problems could also arise in circumstances where customers who continued to require assistance following their first payment of Universal Credit which would not be covered under the new Help to Claim arrangements.

Officers were currently working through a number of options regarding potential Lincoln based internal Universal Credit support arrangements, to be considered in advance of 1 July 2019. It was highlighted that North Kesteven residents would be affected by any decision made, such as those who lived in postcodes coming under Lincoln Jobcentre Plus in City Hall. In discussing this matter members requested a list of the postcodes that would be impacted by this decision and it was agreed that these would be circulated in due course.

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service verbally updated that it had now been agreed for the Lincoln based Universal Credit support team to continue up to 30 September 2019, with a review to be undertaken in advance of that date.

Members reflected on the very successful and award winning team that had been put in place as part of the Shared Service to deliver Universal Credit Support and reiterated their disappointment that the government had introduced a new regime without any form of consultation having taken place. It was reported that communication between partners during the transitional arrangements had been excellent and that the focus had been and would always be on the wellbeing of the customer.

A question was asked as to whether officers were confident that Citizens Advice had the systems in place to be able to deliver what was necessary before October. The Head of the Shared Service, in response, reminded the Committee that the contractual arrangement was ultimately between the Department for Work and Pensions and Citizens Advice although the Shared Service would continue to work with both partners given the vested interest both local authorities had in ensuring that appropriate levels of support were in place.

10. Welfare Reform Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an update regarding the national and local position of welfare reform, with a specific focus on Universal Credit updates.

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The following updates as contained within the report were noted:

- national progress – 1,959,129 households were currently receiving Universal Credit and 33% of these were in employment;
- private landlord portal – the Department for Work and Pensions had announced that they were developing a private landlord portal;
- recent changes to Universal Credit following the Autumn 2018 Budget announcement and January 2019 announcement – Appendix 1 attached to the report outlined all key changes and how these would impact customers and the respective local authority.

The report also provided information on mixed age couples following a change implemented from 15 May 2019. From that date, mixed age couples where one party was over pension credit qualifying age and the other being under that age would no longer be able to choose whether they claimed Universal Credit, pension credit or pension age housing benefit. Instead, both parties of a couple would have to reach the pension credit qualifying age before they could be

entitled to pension credit or pension age housing benefit. There were, however, a range of protections associated with this, as set out in paragraph 6.2 of the report.

Couples who were under state pension age and had an award of housing benefit assessed under the Housing Benefit Regulations 2006 would become a mixed age couple once one member reached pension age. At this point, rather than re-assessing the claim the couple would be advised that they need to claim Universal Credit.

Progress with the Shared Service's high level Welfare Strategy Action Plan would be monitored by the Joint Committee on a quarterly basis and was appended to the report for consideration. Updates on progress of the plan were also appended to the report and reflected a fluid and flexible response to changes in welfare reform related priorities, changes and demands.

11. Exclusion of the Press and Public

RESOLVED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items of business because it is likely that if members of the public were present there would be a disclosure to them of 'exempt information' as defined by Section 100I and Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

12. Staffing Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with recommendations regarding potential staffing changes within the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Decision

That the staffing proposals set out in section 4 of the report be approved.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The reason for this decision was set out in the report.