

Present: Councillor Ray Cucksey (*in the Chair*),
Councillor Sally Tarry and Councillor Ric Metcalfe

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Rosanne Kirk and Philip Roberts

49. Confirmation of Minutes - 10 September 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2020 be confirmed.

50. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

51. Covid-19 Impacts on Revenues and Benefits Service

Purpose of Report

To provide Members with an update regarding Covid-19 impacts on the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Decision

That the report be noted and an update would be presented at the 23rd February 2021 committee.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report outlined the key impacts on the shared service following the first 'lockdown' in the United Kingdom.

It was reported that the impacts of workload and priorities had been significant. In terms of collection and recovery of monies due to the Council, levels of benefit and Council Tax Support claims, requests for data extracts from the Revenues and Benefits ICT system, delivery of Test and Trace Support Payments, as well as being central to this assessment and delivery of grants and reliefs to qualifying businesses.

In terms of staffing, all members of the Revenues and Benefits were mobilised to work from home during a two-week period during March 2020. Around one-quarter of the team already had working from home IT facilities in place, mainly for ad hoc purposes and specific tasks, so the concept was proven – however, the large scale deployment of staff to work from home (not only within the shared service, but across the partner Councils as a whole too) had been unprecedented.

It was reported that staff wellbeing continued to be at the heart of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and regular liaisons with all teams were carried out as explained in more detail within the report.

In regard to Business Rates, there had been a 33% increase in telephone calls and 10% in incoming correspondence (in comparison to October 2019). Council Tax had increased by 43% in e-forms and 12% increase in incoming emails (in comparison to August-October 2019). Benefits had received a 42% increase in Council Tax Support claims in Quarters 1 and 2 in 2020/21 (compared to Quarters 1 and 2 2019/20) and a 96% increase in Universal Credit related documents in Quarters 1 and 2 2020/21 (compared to Quarters 1 and 2 2019/20).

52. 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 and an update would be presented at the next meeting of this committee on 23rd February 2021.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report provided information on Revenues performance with regard to Council Tax for the City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council, together with business rates in respect of the City of Lincoln Council, North Kesteven District Council and West Lindsey District Council. This provided figures for the current year 2020/21 up to the end of October 2020, including annual outturn Revenues and Benefits performance for 2019/20.

It was reported that Council Tax, up to the end of October 2020, in-year collection was down for both the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven by 2.49% and 2.38% respectively, compared to the same point in 2019.

In regard to Business Rates, up to the end of October 2020 (compared to the end of October 2019), 2020/21 in-year collection for Lincoln and North Kesteven went up by 3.94% and 1.55% respectively. However, these figures remained somewhat 'skewed' by the new reliefs available this year in light of the new measures announced as part of the government's Covid-19 response. For Lincoln there was still £5.5m to be collected as at the end of October 2020, with the equivalent figure for North Kesteven being £5.9m. West Lindsey in-year collection was down by 2.54% at the end of October 2020 - again, net liability was greatly reduced due to reliefs applied – there remained £1.7m still to be collected in respect of 2020/21.

Further information relating to outstanding revenues customers and housing benefit overpayments were set out in the report. The latest figures as at the end

of October 2020 indicated that outstanding revenues stood at a total of 845 of which 621 were from the City of Lincoln and 224 were from North Kesteven.

In terms of benefits performance, the table at paragraph 5.2 of the report highlighted the number of outstanding benefits customers awaiting assessment at the end of each financial year since the formation of the shared service. Paragraph 5.3 of the report set out the same information in respect of housing benefit average processing times. The latest figures as at the end of October 2020 showed the City of Lincoln performing at 16.16 days and North Kesteven 15.38 days.

53. Revenue and Benefits - Financial Monitoring Quarter 2 2020/21

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with the second quarter's financial performance for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service for 2020/21.

Decision

That the budget adjustments for 2020/21 as set out in paragraph 3.2 of the report be approved.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The approved budget for 2020/21 was agreed by the Joint Committee on 5th February 2020 and had been set as £2,426,630 for the Shared Service which had since been increased by the agreed carry forward budget from 2019/20 totalling £51,940.

Financial performance for the first quarter of 2020/21 was detailed in Appendix 1 of the report and it was noted that there was an overspend against the approved budget of £13,987.

The forecast outturn for 2020/21 predicted that there would be an overspend against the approved budget of £34,462 as detailed in Appendix 2 of the report.

A summary of the main forecast year-end variations against the approved budget were set out in the report and included Staffing, Overtime, IT costs and New Burdens Grants.

54. Business Rates Update

Purpose of Report

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

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The following updates were noted:

Expanded Retail Discount

In response to Covid-19, in the Budget on 11 March 2020, Government announced that it would increase the discount for 2020/21 to 100% and extend it to include the leisure and hospitality sectors. On 23 March 2020, further measures were announced which resulted in the relief being applied to occupied retail, leisure and hospitality properties in the year 2020/21, as well as removing the rateable value limit.

Nursery Discount

In response to Covid-19, Government announced a business rates Nursery Discount on 18 March 2020. The relief would be applied to hereditaments occupied by providers on Ofsted's Early Years Register and wholly or mainly used for the provision of the Early Years Foundation Stage and were subject to businesses rates in the year 2020/21.

Support for Businesses – Lockdown Grants

On 31 October 2020, the Government announced new national restrictions which required certain businesses and venues to close - or restrict how they provide goods and services - from 5 November to 2 December 2020. These were:

- Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSB); and
- Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG).

Local Authorities would be issued funding allocations that would be calculated using the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) data based on the categories of businesses relevant to the closures imposed by the Government.

Local Restrictions Support Grant

The support would take the form of a grant funding scheme in Financial Year 2020-2021 and would be for the period of the current lockdown period only (5 November 2020 to 2 December 2020). Local Authorities would be provided with funding for businesses that were required to close because of the formal publication of local restrictions guidance by central Government.

The level of funding for this grant was as follows:

- City of Lincoln - £2,181,564
- North Kesteven - £1,311,462

Additional Restrictions Grant

The support would take the form of a funding scheme in Financial Year 2020-2021 and could be used across Financial Years 20/21 and 21/22. Local Authorities would receive a one-off lump sum payment amounting to £20 per head of population. Local Authorities were only eligible to receive funding once.

The level of funding was as follows:

- City of Lincoln - £1,985,980
- North Kesteven - £2,338,300

It was reported that Local authorities determined how much funding to provide to businesses and exactly which businesses to target.

ATM Appeal Threat

On Wednesday 20th May 2020 the Supreme Court gave its decision on whether Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs) accessed from inside or outside a host retail property should be separately assessed.

The court dismissed the appeals, stating that internal and external ATMs were to be treated the same and should not be separately assessed. As a result, a significant number of related appeal cases were now being settled following the Supreme Court decision. The levels of refunds for each authority was outlined in 9.2 of the report.

55. Welfare Reform, Covid Support and Discretionary Housing Payments

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 the local advice referral process, COVID-19 support and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

Decision

That the report be noted and an update would be presented at the next meeting of this committee.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

This report provided Joint Committee with an update on national Universal Credit changes; including a reference to the national statistics and national legislation changes.

Appendix 1 of the report showed the less complex cases received in order to free up the Welfare Team for the more complex cases. Universal Credit, Loans, Child Benefit and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were a few examples of this.

As a result of Covid-19, businesses had to close resulting in people's incomes being significantly affected. The Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme, the Self Employed Income Scheme, Increased Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit

as well as changes to LHA rates (April 19 – March 20) and Minimum Income Floor (MIF) were a few of the schemes explained and outlined at Appendix 2

Also outlined in Appendix 2 were the national support measures including what people would be entitled to if affected by Covid-19. This included, Statutory Sick Pay (SMP), 'Waiting days' removed, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Medical Assessments and Jobcentre Appointments, Suspension of DWP Recovery of Certain Debts.

A Test and Trace Support Payment Scheme was available and the eligibility for this was also explained with Appendix 2 including the total number of applications received from the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven.

56. Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan 2021/22

Purpose of Report

To provide the Joint Committee with an opportunity to consider the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for 2021/22

Decision

That the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan 2021/22 be approved.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for the financial year 2021/22 was attached at Appendix 1 to the report and featured the following:

- Key Achievements in 2020/21;
- Savings in 2020/21;
- Key Activities for 2021/22;
- Strategic Priority Schemes 2021/22;
- Towards Financial Sustainability projects 2021/22;
- Key Risks;
- Performance Management;
- Safeguarding;
- Equality Actions;
- Working in Neighbourhoods;
- Workforce Development;
- Social Value;
- Data Protection and Information Governance.

It was reported that the year 2020/21 had been another very positive year for the shared service with most areas of performance progressing well, continued implementation and embedment of integrated e-forms, as well as a whole host of improvement and partnership projects. However, the impacts of Covid-19 have been significant and couldn't be underestimated.

Delivery of the Test and Trace Support Payments project from September 2020 to January 2021 was a key project to help people cope with changes in financial circumstances due to needing to self-isolate. Working under the Head of Shared Revenues and Benefits, a cross-Councils project team came together with members from a range of service areas, to proactively develop processes, an online application form as well as a policy for discretionary scheme cases. This was a great example of a holistic approach to service delivery, taking on board a range of expertise and ideas.

Councillor Ray Cucksey commended an excellent report which highlighted the current position with regard to where the Shared Service was going and what it was achieving and congratulated Martin and his team on what must have been a difficult year with so many challenges faced.

Councillor Ric Metcalfe echoed the words of Councillor Cucksey and highlighted how important the service was to the Council and that all the hard work after a difficult year was appreciated.