

SUBJECT:	REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED SERVICE BUSINESS PLAN 2020/21
DIRECTORATE:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE
REPORT AUTHOR:	MARTIN WALMSLEY, HEAD OF SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 As set out in the Shared Revenues and Benefits Business Case Delegation and Joint Committee Agreement, an annual Business Plan will be presented to this committee in November/December each year for consideration and approval. Due to the purdah period prior to the 12th December 2019 general election, this report was deferred from the 25th November 2019 to the 5th February 2020 Joint Committee.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report sets out the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for 2020/21.

3. Business Plan

- 3.1 The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for the financial year 2020/21 is included as Appendix 1 to this report.
- 3.2 Key features of the plan, are:
- Key Achievements in 2019/20;
 - Savings in 2019/20;
 - Key Activities for 2020/21;
 - Strategic Priority schemes 2020/21;
 - Towards Financial Sustainability projects 2020/21
 - Key Risks;
 - Performance Management;
 - Safeguarding;
 - Equality actions;
 - Working in Neighbourhoods;
 - Workforce Development;
 - Social Value;
 - Data Protection and Information Governance.

4. Summary of Plan

- 4.1 The year 2019/20 has been another very positive year for our 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. Again, these notable achievements have been carried out under the significant environment of ongoing demands placed on the service from both national and local challenges – such as welfare reforms, as well as the economic climate.
- 4.2 Most areas of our shared service are performing well, however the impact of Universal Credit (UC) has had an impact on Benefit processing times due to the volume of related documents requiring to be processed by the team, as well as the time it takes for UC-related evidence to be collated for 'exempt accommodation' Housing Benefit claims.
- 4.3 Response times to all customer channels are continually monitored, and a review of these will take place in 2020/21 – particular in relation to Council Tax e-mails, due to significant demand and increases in domestic properties in both districts.
- 4.4 Our Universal Credit (UC) Support arrangements have continued to assist customers to maintain their claims, provide digital assistance, provide or refer to personal budgeting support, as well as a variety of related areas. It is vital, once central government has announced support plans for 2020/21, that officers consider the effects on support in our districts and respond accordingly.
- 4.5 Ongoing budget pressures including a combined reduction in funding through Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) for 2019/20 meant that a reduction in staffing levels (1 FTE officer) was implemented, however considered budget management has provided opportunities to place resources in 'hotspots' of demand as required – and it is important that management continues to consider allocation of resources proactively ready for 2020/21.
- 4.6 The plan for 2020/21 continues to look at a range of key initiatives, with Business Rates retention, e-services, welfare reforms and standards of performance unsurprisingly still crucial areas for the new financial year.
- 4.7 The shared service has started to increase its focus on seeking partnership working opportunities and new areas of work which fit within the service's wider remit, as well as successfully maintaining current arrangements, some of which have agreements due to be reviewed in advance of 2021/22.
- 4.8 In very challenging times for local government in general, not least of which being in respect of Revenues and Benefit – due to the nature of the service each household and business in the districts is impacted in some way by the services we provided. This highlights just how important it is that our shared service is not seen as a 'transactional service', but a key strategic service that has tangible impacts on people's lives – it is important the impacts we have are positive wherever possible, aiming to help people become financially and digitally included and helping those in a position to find employment. Our shared service is extremely well placed to tackle the challenges, and positive opportunities, ahead.

5. Strategic Priorities

- 5.1 Both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven have a number of strategic priorities. Two that have an impact on the Revenues and Benefits Service are:-
- Lincoln: “Let’s Reduce Inequality”.
 - North Kesteven: “Our Communities”.
- 5.2 The Benefits Service plays a key role in reducing inequality by ensuring residents receive the benefits they are entitled to and providing money / debt advice. The Revenues Section is also mindful of the strategic priorities when engaging with business ratepayers as they recover business rates – and also promoting and encouraging growth in the districts. Digital Inclusion, Channel Shift/ Customer Experience, Financial Inclusion and Partnership Working are all key priorities for the shared service.

6. Organisational Impacts

- 6.1 Finance: Any costs/savings need to have due regard to the Medium Term Financial Strategies of both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven. A verbal update regarding central government funding announcements for 2020/21 will be provided to this Committee.
- 6.2 Legal Implications including Procurement Rules: There are no direct Legal or Procurement implications arising from this report.
- 6.3 Equality, Diversity & Human Rights: There are no direct implications arising from this report.

7. Risk Implications

- 7.1 A Risk Register is in place for the Revenues and Benefits shared service, and is included at Appendix 2 to this report.

8. Recommendation

- 8.1 The Joint Committee is recommended to:
- 1) Comment on the Annual Business Plan for the shared service, and
 - 2) Approve the 2020/21 Business Plan.

Is this a key decision? Yes/No

Do the exempt information categories apply? Yes/No

Does Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules (call-in and urgency) apply? Yes/No

How many appendices does the report contain?

Appendix 1 – Business Plan 2020/21
Appendix 2 – Risk Register

List of Background Papers:

None

Lead Officer:

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