

Present: Councillor Gary Hewson (*in the Chair*),
Councillor Thomas Dyer, Councillor
Rebecca Longbottom, Councillor Bill Mara, Councillor
Laura McWilliams, Councillor Pat Vaughan and Councillor
Lorraine Woolley

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Helena Mair, Councillor Lucinda Preston and
Jaclyn Gibson

8. Confirmation of Minutes - 9 July 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9th July 2020 be confirmed.

9. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Pat Vaughan declared a Personal Interest with regard to the agenda item titled 'Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Update'. Reason: His daughter worked in the Welfare Advice Section of the City of Lincoln Council.

Councillor Pat Vaughan declared a Personal Interest with regard to the agenda item titled 'Income and Arrears Monitoring'. Reason: His daughter worked in the Welfare Advice Section of the City of Lincoln Council.

10. Portfolio Holder under Scrutiny - Our People and Resources

Councillor Richard Metcalfe, Portfolio Holder for Our People and Resources and Leader of the Council, presented a report to Performance Scrutiny Committee outlining the significant effects of the COVID19 virus on our services, the way the Council was working and the ongoing recovery process in the following areas:

- a) **Our People** – HR had developed significant support for all – available on City People. This Included:
- Plans for looking after our most vulnerable staff and members
 - Wellbeing action plans for staff, members and managers
 - Introduction of the new cycle to work scheme
 - Links to Every Mind Matters, 'One You' and MIND advice
 - Policy adaptations to allow staff to work effectively and safely
 - Tips on everything from yoga, fitness, working from home to preventing burnout

The IT team had provided, at very short notice the backbone of a new structure which had allowed the Council to function as a cohesive One Council unit:

- 630 full Team Licenses were in operation across the council
- 300 new mobile devices had been distributed to allow for home working
- Over a recent 90-day period there were 380 (unique) active users of 'Teams'
- IT had provided on-line training solutions, tips and hints for all

Members had been able to continue with decision making through the media of Zoom, with key committee meetings held remotely.

As a contribution towards balancing the books, a number of staff agreed to accept a furlough period.

- b) **Our Financial Resources** – it was evident that COVID19 had, and would continue to have, a significant and unprecedented effect on the Council's position. Income streams had plummeted, and it had been necessary to incur additional cost to ensure services continued to be provided throughout and to respond to the consequences of the pandemic.

To date the Council had received funding support of £1.255m? for COVID19 related pressures. In addition, the Government had recently announced an income compensation scheme which sought to reimburse Council's for every 75p in the £1 of lost sales, fees and charges income after allowing for a 5% deductible.

Despite the Government financial support, the Council was still forecasting a shortfall on the General Fund budget of £1.834m in 2020/21. The Housing Revenue Account was forecasting a £0.671m shortfall for which no government support had been provided.

- c) **Our Services** - key services continued with minimal negative effect on residents and businesses and the City of Lincoln Council had received significant recognition from the public.

Key points to note:

- All defined critical services remained functional throughout lockdown.
- Excellent communication had been given to all sectors of the community through a strong series of branded support and advice – pushed out on our website and social media.
- All street sleepers and those in hotels and B&B which closed were provided with accommodation at the start of the lockdown, 21 people having benefited from this.
- Supported Housing conducted between 200 and 300 welfare checks daily.
- Staff were trained as back up staff for critical services in case of need.
- Customer services dealt with emails within one working day maximum.
- Revenues and Benefits dealt with five times as many new claims as usual.
- Despite restriction, our Bereavement team provided sympathetic services.
- Waste and recycling collections continued throughout lockdown and bulky waste collections started again in May after a short close-down period. Green waste services had continued and relaunched for the new service year.
- CCTV had kept a close eye on our city centre, working closely with the police and other partners.
- The Food H&S team provided advice on the new government guidance.

- Emergency Housing repairs and work on void properties continued throughout.
- Lincare took over the Housing tenants befriending service in June.
- Two housing rent-free weeks were brought forward to April to ease financial difficulties.
- Tenancy Services set up a Tenancy Hardship fund to directly help those tenants impacted on financially.
- All public parks and commons, including Hartsholme Country Park, remained open for use throughout the lock down period, and provided vital opportunities for health and recreation.
- Street cleaning teams remained working, and modified work to take advantage of reduced footfall, tackling other troublesome issues such as graffiti.
- Although the general grounds maintenance functions reduced initially, they resumed quickly, keeping basic services running throughout.
- The allotments service never stopped, the annual renewals were undertaken, and now had numbers of tenants not seen for many years, including a new site.
- Scaled back parking services were maintained to ensure support for those who needed to park.
- The bus station, and its public toilets, had remained open to ensure travelling key workers were supported.
- Progress was maintained with the Boutham Park lake restoration project, recognising the increasing importance of good quality open spaces not just under COVID19, but on public health longer term.

In the community leadership role, new community support activities were instigated:

- Business support - a cross directorate working group of up to 20 people from ten services contacted Lincoln businesses to ensure they benefited from available support and achieved any business rate relief they were entitled to.
- Almost 500 residents signed up to our Befriending Service manned by staff and members, with vulnerable residents receiving weekly calls to help them through issues of isolation and maintain their mental health.
- We launched a Community Signposting Helpline to point residents towards all sorts of support from Foodbanks to a new map of local community groups.
- Working with partners, the Lincoln Community Foundation Crisis Fund was launched in early May to provide financial grants for charities and community groups delivering support to Lincoln residents.

Re-mobilisation plans had taken place covering the following areas:

- Working with our partners to enable the re-opening of the city centre safely.
- Agreement with the Unions guidance and risk assessments for staff to return to work safely.
- Opened Customer Services in City Hall on an appointment basis from July.

- Reduced City of Lincoln Council car parking fees to encourage people back into the city centre.
- Developed an exit plan for people still using the Befriending Service, so they could still access calls if they needed them.
- Decision taken to cancel all large volume events for the rest of 2020 – this included civic events including the Christmas lights switch on, mayoral activity - as well as our key sporting events and of course the Christmas Market.
- Reopened uphill toilets to ensure there were facilities available both uphill and downhill for shoppers return. Some facilities however did remain closed.
- Re-opened our play areas.
- Deep cleaned the city centre in preparation for retailer re-openings.
- Our housing building projects restarted and were all making good progress.
- We currently had 123 open homelessness applications and working hard to prevent homelessness or find alternative accommodation.
- Welcomed back and re-opened the Visitor Information Centre in uphill Lincoln.
- Helped develop a Local Outbreak Plan to deal with a possible second Covid19 wave in Lincolnshire.
- Reopened our camp site at Hartsholme Park to support the visitor economy.

d) **Performance Challenges for the coming year in Lincolnshire** – an increased workload had been seen or was expected in the following areas:

- Revenues and Benefits teams – expected to continue seeing higher new claims. For example: Business Rate Relief and Local Council Tax Support Scheme claims.
- Welfare Advice team.
- PPASB – especially instances of domestic abuse.
- Homelessness.

e) invited members' questions and comments.

Question: Members asked whether reducing the car parking fees and bringing the free two weeks rent for Council Tenants had resulted in a positive effect?

Response: An initiative in car parks had been in place which meant customers could park for £4 for a day and £1 for an hour. This had worked very well but the volumes were still not to the point that they were before Covid -19.

Question: Members asked whether there were some staff that were still furloughed?

Response: There were 64 staff that were on furlough. This was to be reviewed to see if it would continue into September.

Question: Members asked why there was such a shortfall on the General Fund budget?

Response: The shortfall was due to reduced income across many income generating services including rent loss, some of this would be made up and the rest was to be looked at.

Question: Members asked what the position was for car parking compared to this time last year?

Response: On average £500k was budgeted for each month through car parking pre covid. In July 2020 just £120k was made. Government had announced a scheme to reimburse 75p for every £1 in income that had been lost.

Question: The Christmas Market had been cancelled. Members asked what the update position was for the Remembrance and Battle of Britain services?

Response: The Battle of Britain Event had been cancelled and the Remembrance Service would consist of a simply low key wreath laying.

Question: Members asked whether we had been to court to remove the travellers on South Park and whether the barricades could be made more substantial so access would be more difficult?

Response: There was an increase in travellers at this time of the year. The law required us to carry out welfare assessments in advance of going to court for eviction which slowed down the process. The entrances were continually looked at to see if they could be made more secure but often perimeters re so long its difficult to secure all access points.

Question: Members asked whether there was any information regarding the customers who had visited the Visitor Information Centre, such as where they have travelled from and why they had come to Lincoln?

Response: There were signs that a lot more people were taking breaks in Cities such as Lincoln. The footfall counter on the Visitor Information Centre had unfortunately broken, but footfall is measured via our CCTV system, in the city. Periodic surveys were carried out to try and find out why people visited Lincoln. Footfall numbers were to be forwarded to the committee.

Question: Members asked whether the Communications Team was fully staffed?

Response: The Communications Team was now fully staffed after recruiting to the two full time vacant posts.

Question: Members commented that it was nice to see that we were working more with the University and asked how this partnership would be fed down to committees to show what had been achieved?

Response: Partnership working was shown through the Lincoln Town Board. The University had shown a willingness to their CIVIC roll and trying to get the 17000 students back into the City. The CIVIC University Agreement was to be circulated to the committee.

Question: Members asked how staff appraisals were going to be approached?

Response: Vision 2025 was due to be relaunched with a revised work programme which was due to be fed into appraisals. This had been delayed due to Covid-19. Things needed to get back on track and be re-instated.

Question: Members asked what the response was to Local Government proposals as a reply was wanted in September?

Response: There had been a couple of briefings with the Leader and Deputy Leader of the opposition. Everyone should be up to date as to where we stood and the options that were available to us. At present the future of Local Government was not known.

RESOLVED that:

1. Officers be tasked to look at the entrances to Malandry Closes at South Park Common to stop travellers entering the site.
2. Footfall details for the Visitor Information Centre be forwarded to the Committee
3. The CIVIC University Agreement be forwarded to the committee
4. The content of the report be noted.

11. Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Update

Martin Walmsley, Head of Shared Revenues and Benefits;

- a) provided members with an update on performance in the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
- b) highlighted that compared to 2018/19, Council Tax in-year collection had increased by 0.01%, which was considered a positive collection outturn in the current climate, considering the economic challenges and March 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak, net collectable debit increased from 2018/19 by £2.57m
- c) explained that the number of outstanding revenues customers at the end of quarter 4 2019/20 showed a 15% increase compared to the same point in 2018/19, 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 and an additional 150 properties had been added to the Council Tax base to administer
- d) advised that although the overall position was not as positive as in recent financial years, the impacts of COVID from mid-end March 2020 could not be underestimated – with a significant increase in benefit claims, in addition to the usual increase in workload prior to the start of a new financial year – relating to income and rent increases, as evidence of this, on 16th March there were 940 customer awaiting benefits assessments and by 31st March, the number outstanding had increased to 1,510
- e) highlighted that the Welfare and Benefits Advice Team in 2019/20 had:

- Provided benefits advice to 7,372 customers
- Helped customers to secure £1.4m in additional benefits on an annual basis
- Helped customers to secure a total of £210k in lump sum benefit payments
- Provided money advice to help customers manage debt totalling

f) invited members' questions and comments.

Question: Members asked how many additional Universal Credit Claims had been made since March?

Response: The figures would be circulated to the committee once they were available.

Question: Members asked whether there was an opportunity for another Council to join our partnership working?

Response: Our plan was always to expand partnership working.

Question: Members asked how Universal Credit claims had been working since it was transferred to the Citizens Advice Bureau? Members were conscious that a lot of claims would hit a lot of families and potentially cause them to become homeless.

Response: Universal Credit expertise among staff was being used to make referrals to Citizens Advice. If the claimant could not be helped by Citizens Advice they would be referred to ourselves to see if there was any way we could help them. There were Welfare Reform experts within the benefits team that would work with Housing to try and prevent evictions wherever possible.

RESOLVED that:

1. Details on the amount of additional Universal Credit applications that had been received since March be forwarded to the committee
2. The information in the report be noted.

12. Income and Arrears Monitoring

Martin Walmsley, Head of Shared Revenues and Benefits;

- a) provided members with an update on the position regarding amounts of monies owed to the City Council as at 1st April 2020, (and Business Improvement District (BID) levy to the end of June 2020)
- b) highlighted that:
 - The net collectable debit for 2019/20 after Council Tax Support, discounts and exemptions had been granted was £44,334,821, amounting to an increase of £2,566,992 from 2018/19.
 - Total payments received in respect of 2019/20 were £42,900,788 amounting to an increase of £2,517,769 from 2018/19.

- Council Tax arrears brought forward from all previous years at 1st April 2019 totalled £5,175,548. By 31st March 2020 these arrears decreased to £3,474,427.

c) explained that

- The net Business Rates collectable debit for 2019/20 after empty voids, charity entitlements and other reliefs had been granted was £44,549,447, an increase of £90,439 from 2018/19.
- Total payments received in respect of 2019/20 were £44,308,107. This was a decrease of £66,868 from 2018/19.

d) advised that the City of Lincoln Council was responsible for the administration and collection of the BID Levy and the net collectable debit raised in respect of the levy was £413.321

e) explained that the net Housing Rent debit for 2019/20 (collectable rent) excluding Housing Benefits and other adjustments was £15,207,509 of which 97.77% was collected, amounting to an increase of 0.23% on 2018/19 collection of 97.54%

f) highlighted that a total of 11,563 new debtor accounts were raised in 2019/20 amounting to £18,025,866 in cash terms

g) explained that the balance of outstanding Housing Benefit Overpayments as at 1st April 2020 was £3,573,112 compared to £3,973,125 at 1st April 2019, a decrease of £400,013

h) Invited members' questions and comments.

Question: Members asked what action was being taken regarding the increase in Council Tax arrears and whether this was normal to have risen by half a million pounds a year?

Response: Debts got harder to recover the older they were. There were a lot of customers deferring council tax payments over the last few months due to Covid-19 and staff were starting to further collect these monies. Council Tax reminders were going to start being sent out again. Enforcement agent collections may be carried out but only for certain cases, - this is usually a last resort option. This would help bring arrears down, but it is important that customers are not being put further into debt and there is a focus on welfare.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

13. Work Programme for 2020/21

Clare Stait, Democratic Services Officer:

- a) presented the draft work programme for 2020/21 as detailed at Appendix A of her report
- b) advised that the work programme for the Performance Scrutiny Committee was put forward annually for approval by Council; the work programme was then regularly updated throughout the year in consultation with the Performance Scrutiny Committee and its Chair

- c) reported that items had been scheduled in accordance with the existing work programme and officers' guidance regarding the meetings at which the most up-to-date information could be reported to the committee; the work programme also included the list of portfolio holders under scrutiny
- d) requested any relevant comments or changes to the proposed work programme for 2020/21.

RESOLVED that the work programme 2020/21 be noted.

14. Strategic Risk Register - Quarterly Review

Pat Jukes, Business Manager – Corporate Policy, on behalf of Jaclyn Gibson, Chief Finance Officer:

- a) presented Performance Scrutiny Committee with a status report of the revised Strategic Risk Register as at the end of the first quarter 2020/21
- b) reported that the strategic risk registers currently contained thirteen risks as follows:
 - 1) Failure to engage & influence effectively the Council's strategic partners, council staff and all stakeholders to deliver against e.g. Council's Vision 2025
 - 2) Failure to deliver a sustainable Medium-Term Financial Strategy (that supports delivery of Vision 2025).
 - 3) Failure to deliver the Towards Financial Sustainability Programme whilst ensuring the resilience of the Council.
 - 4) Failure to ensure compliance with statutory duties/functions and appropriate governance arrangements were in place.
 - 5) Failure to protect the local authority's vision 2025 due to changing structures and relationships in local government and impact on size, scale and scope of the Council.
 - 6) Unable to meet the emerging changes required in the Council's culture, behaviour and skills to support the delivery of the council's Vision 2020/2025 and the transformational journey to one Council approach.
 - 7) Insufficient levels of resilience and capacity exist in order to deliver key strategic projects & services within the Council.
 - 8) Decline in the economic prosperity within the City Centre.
 - 9) Failure to mitigate against the implications for the Council following the outcome of Brexit.
 - 10) Failure to deliver key strategic projects.

- 11) Failure of the Council's key contractors and partners to remain sustainable and continue to deliver value for money
- 12) Failure to work in partnership to sustain support to vulnerable resident's post COVID19.
- 13) Failure to put in place safe working practices and social distancing measures to protect officers and service users.

RESOLVED that the Strategic Risk Register as at the end of the first quarter 2020/21 be noted.

15. Exclusion of Press and Public

RESOLVED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item(s) 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.

16. Strategic Risk Register - Quarterly Review

Pat Jukes, Business Manager – Corporate Policy, on behalf of Jaclyn Gibson, Chief Finance Officer,

- a) provided members with the revised Strategic Risk Register as attached at Appendix A.
- b) invited members' questions and comments.

Members asked questions on the content of the Strategic Risk Register attached at Appendix A and received relevant responses from officers thereon.

RESOLVED that the Strategic Risk Register as at the end of the first quarter 2020/21 be noted.