

Present: Councillor Ray Cucksey (*in the Chair*),
Councillor Rosanne Kirk and Councillor Ric Metcalfe

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Nikki Dillon, Councillor Michael Kent,
Councillor David Suiter, Jaclyn Gibson, Philip Roberts
and Claire Moses

42. Confirmation of Minutes - 05 February 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 5 February 2020 be confirmed.

43. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

44. Covid-19 Impacts on Revenue and Benefits Service

Purpose of Report

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

Decision

That the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report provided an update regarding Covid-19 impacts on the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service. This provided key impacts on the shared service, from a working operations perspective through to the financial impacts on the Council as a whole and additional demands on the service.

It was reported that all members of the Revenues and Benefits Teams were mobilised to work from home during a two-week period during March 2020. Around one-quarter of the team already had facilities to be able to work from home, 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.

In terms of staff wellbeing, this had been at the heart of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, by partner Councils. In terms of Revenues and Benefits specifically, support for staff from management, and between peers, had been extremely effective, which had helped to highlight and respond to team and individual needs quickly.

In addition, it was noted that March and April were always the busiest months in terms of demands for the shared service, such as, Council Tax billing, Business Rates billing, Benefits upratings and finalisations of Housing Benefit Subsidy Claims, of which had been completed successfully.

Councillor Ray Cucksey commented that tribute was to be paid to all team members for the amount of work that had been done especially for this time of year and during the current pandemic.

45. 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 26th November 2020.

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 July 2020, including annual outturn Revenues and Benefits performance for 2019/20.

It was reported that Council Tax, up to the end of July 2020, in-year collection was down for both the City of Lincoln and North Kesteven by 1.30% and 1.11% respectively. The latest figures up to the end of August 2020 indicated that the City of Lincoln was down by 2.9% and North Kesteven was down by 3.6%. however, it was noted that the net collectible debit had increased for both authorities.

In regard to Business Rates, up to the end of August 2020 (compared to the end of August 2019), in-year collection for Lincoln and North Kesteven was up by 6.54% and 2.18% respectively. For Lincoln there was still £19.4m to be collected for 2019/20 – as at the end of July 2019, £9.9m of this figure had been collected. For North Kesteven, there was still £20.3m to be collected for 2019/20 – as at the end of July 2019, £10.4m of this figure had been collected. West Lindsey in-year collection was down by 1.00% at the end of July 2020 - net liability was greatly reduced with regard to reliefs applied – out of the net £11.7m, £4.9m had been collected so far.

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 July 2020 indicated that outstanding revenues stood at a total of 468 of which 360 were from the City of Lincoln and 108 were from North Kesteven.

There was an amendment to paragraph 4.17 – the Outstanding Housing Benefit Overpayments debt for the City of Lincoln Council should read £3,423,812 and North Kesteven £1,502,103.

In terms of benefits performance, the table at paragraph 5.1 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 5.2 of the report set out the same information in respect of housing benefit average processing times. The latest figures as at the end of July 2020 showed the City of Lincoln performing at 16.16 days and North Kesteven 16.15 days.

46. Revenues and Benefits - Financial Monitoring Quarter 1 2020/21

Purpose of Report

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

Decision

That the actual position at quarter 1 be noted and the budget adjustments for 2020/21 as per para 3.2 be approved.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The approved budget for 2020/21 was agreed by the Joint Committee on 5 February 2019 and had been set at £2,426,630 for the Shared Service. This had since been increased by the agreed carry forward budget from 2019/20, totalling £51,940. In addition a number of New Burdens grants for NK were still to be reflected which would offset their proportion of the forecast overspend.

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 underspend against the approved budget of £2,590.

The forecast outturn for 2020/21 predicted that there would be an overspend against the approved budget of £10,737 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 IT costs, salaries, car allowances mileage and agency spend.

Councillor Ray Cucksey sought clarification as to why agency staff were not used and whether this was down to the team that was currently in place and whether there were any staff changes anticipated. It was reported that over the last 2/3 years staff turnover had been reduced and was mainly down to the team being happy and having a lot of support from managers. The Council Tax Team

Leader was leaving at the end of the month but this position had been filled internally

47. 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 was to 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 which are subject to businesses rates in the year 2020/21.

Support for Businesses – Grants

In response to Covid-19, the Government announced there would be support for small businesses and businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. The support will take the form of two grant funding schemes in the financial year of 2020/21 – these being:

- Small Business Grant Fund - £10,000 grant; and
- Retail Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund - £10,000 or £25,000 grant.

Small Business Grant Fund

This fund was available for all businesses in England in receipt of either Small Business Rates (SBRR) or Rural Rates Relief (RRR). The value of the grant was £10,000.

It was reported that each authority set up a grants team, which included officers from various service areas such as Economic Development, Business Support, Finance and Revenues and Benefits. The grants team mobilised quickly and put stages in place as at paragraph 7.4 of the report.

Retail Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund

This fund was available for all businesses in England that would have been in receipt of the Expanded Retail Discount on 11 March 2020 and with a rateable value up to (but not including) £51,000.

The total grants awarded for each LA as at 16 August 2020 was shown in the table at paragraph 8.7 and 8.8 of the report.

Local Authority Discretionary Grants Fund

This additional fund was aimed at small and micro businesses who were not eligible for the Small Business Grant Fund or Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Fund.

The total grants awarded for each LA as at 16 August 2020 was shown in the table at paragraph 9.8 of the report.

Discretionary Relief Scheme

The tables at paragraph 10.6 of the report outlined the number of accounts identified and the total cost of relief for all 4 years for each of the partner authorities.

It was reported that there was a typing error at paragraph 8.7. the figure for North Kesteven should read £22.3m.

Councillor Ray Cucksey commented that a lot of support had been given to businesses especially as a lot of them were under enormous pressure. Gratitude should be given to the team especially as they have been working from home and had still managed to achieve a lot and help a lot of businesses.

48. 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 the local advice referral process and Covid-19 support.

Decision

That the report be noted and an update would be presented at the next meeting of this committee on 26th November 2020.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report provided the Joint Committee with national and local changes made to support those financially adversely affected by Covid-19

Appendix 1 of the report showed the areas referrals were received from. Along with details of the point of referral.

As a result of Covid-19, there had been a number of changes made to legacy benefits, Universal Credit and support for those in or retaining employment. These announcements were detailed in Appendix 2 of the report.

Appendix 3 of the report showed the guidance that was provided to staff following the outbreak of Covid-19.