

SUBJECT: WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

DIRECTORATE: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

LEAD OFFICER: REBECCA COX, WELFARE REFORM AND PROJECT LEAD

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide 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) for this report.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides Joint Committee with an update on national Universal Credit (UC) changes; to include reference to the national statistics and national legislation changes.

The report also provides Joint Committee with updates regarding:

- Local advice referrals into the Welfare Reform Support team;
- National and local changes made to support those financially adversely affected by COVID-19;
- Financial position for Discretionary Housing Payments.

3. Background

- 3.1 The national Welfare Reform agenda has had a significant impact on residents of Lincoln and North Kesteven since 2013 when certain changes were introduced – such as Removal of Spare Room Subsidy, and Benefit Cap – and has continued as further changes have been introduced, such as the ongoing rollout of Universal Credit. These changes have resulted in major changes to the operating of our shared service, to ensure a proactive and positive response to welfare reform and the impacts on residents.

4. National Progress – Statistics

- 4.1 Latest figures published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were released on 18 May 2021 with statistics relevant to the period up to March 2020.

- 5,972,017 households receiving UC (this is an increase from 5,911,783 as reported at the last meeting of this Committee)

Local authority statistics are also available as at March 2021: -

- City of Lincoln – 10,981 (10,689 as at the last report)
- North Kesteven – 6,752 (6,601 as at the last report)

5. Advice Referrals to Welfare Reform Support Team

- 5.1 Referrals come from Councils' service areas, customers and external stakeholders into the Shared Service Welfare Reform Support team (formerly Universal Support Team).
- 5.2 The advice referral process has resulted in all internal teams and partners working together with the objective of improving the customer journey.
- 5.3 As a result of COVID-19, the Welfare Reform Support Team has been able to provide vital support to new and existing customers – both over the phone and via email. The team is able to explain to customers what support is available to them (national and local), undertake assessments for Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing Payments.

The team also provides advice and guidance to the Revenues and Benefits staff regarding changes to legislation.

6. COVID-19 National support for customers affected

- 6.1 As a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, there have been a number of changes made to legacy benefits, Universal Credit and support for those in or retaining employment, - which have been reported to this Committee previously.

7. COVID-19 Test and Trace Self Isolation Payments

- 7.1 From 28 September 2020, anyone who has been told to self-isolate has a legal obligation to do so. To support those who self-isolate, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) introduced the Test and Trace Self Isolation Payment (TTSP).
- 7.2 The TTSP scheme is administered by Local Authorities, with guidance from DHSC. There are two schemes – the mandatory and discretionary. Both schemes are payments of £500 and certain eligibility criteria need to be met.

7.3 The mandatory scheme:

This is a national scheme and eligibility criteria has been set by the Department for Health and Social Care. The payment is £500 providing the individual lives in England and meets all the following criteria: -

- have been told to stay at home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, either because they have tested positive for coronavirus or have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive; and
- employed or self-employed; and
- unable to work from home and will lose income as a result of self-isolating; and
- currently receiving at least one of the following:
 - Universal Credit

- Working Tax Credit
- income-based Employment and Support Allowance
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income Support
- Housing Benefit
- Pension Credit.

7.4 The discretionary scheme:

There are three national eligibility criteria which have been set by the Department for Health and Social Care, then each Local Authority can include their own discretionary criteria.

7.5 The shared service has approved the same policy for both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven District Council. The eligibility criteria is as follows: -

- have been told to stay at home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, either because they have tested positive for coronavirus or have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive; and
- employed or self-employed; and
- unable to work from home and will lose income as a result of self-isolating; and
- have capital of less than £1,000 (*this limit is under review*); and
- have income which does not exceed expenditure.

7.6 The Welfare Reform Support Team has received all applications and undertaken assessment decisions. Also, the team secured further funding from Lincolnshire County Council to make TTSP-related payments utilising Winter Grant Scheme monies.

In total, the team have received 1,312 applications for City of Lincoln, of which at the time of writing this report on the 14th May 2021, 488 have received a payment. A breakdown of the applications is shown in the table below:

City of Lincoln:

	Received	Pending	Unsuccessful	Total Paid/Eligible	Value
Mandatory	397	11	188	198	£99,000
Discretionary	822	24	556	242	£121,000
Winter Grant Scheme	93	0	45	48	£24,000

Total	1312	36	788	488	£244,000
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In total, the team have received 797 applications for North Kesteven, of which at the time of writing this report on the 14th May 2021, 270 have received a payment. A breakdown of the applications is shown in the table below:

North Kesteven:

	Received	Pending	Unsuccessful	Total Paid/Eligible	Value
Mandatory	207	10	87	108	£54,000
Discretionary	545	44	368	135	£67,500
Winter Grant Scheme	45	0	18	27	£13,500
Total	797	54	473	270	£135,000

- 7.7 The national TTSP scheme was due to end on the 31st January 2021 but was extended on the 1st February 2021 and is now due to end on the 30th June 2021. Ministers are currently assessing the scheme to decide if it should continue, and a decision is expected regarding this in early June.
- 7.8 In April 2021, additional Winter Grant Scheme funding was awarded to each authority to help those customers facing financial hardship, and in particular to help with payments of utility bills. The Welfare Support team identified these cases using data from the Test & Trace applications along with referrals made by Welfare, Revenues & Benefits and Housing Officers. A total of £65,000 was awarded to each authority and of this £59,500 was spent for City of Lincoln and £64,200 for North Kesteven.
- 7.9 A further round of Winter Grant Scheme funding was secured in May 2021, and as at the time of writing this report, this 'June 2021 scheme' has been agreed and identified cohorts of customers are being assessed regarding potential entitlement. A verbal update will be provided to Joint Committee, on 22nd June.

8. Discretionary Housing Payments

- 8.1 City of Lincoln's government grant for 2020/21 was £250,113 and North Kesteven's £172,612. 2020/21 DHP central government grants for both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven had increased from 2019/20.
- 8.2 The impact of Universal Credit (UC) in Lincoln and North Kesteven is constantly increasing and will continue to do so as UC continues to be rolled out. COVID-19 has had an impact on the number of UC claims being made – seeing an increase in claims, and as a result an increase in UC-related DHP awards. The next stage of UC rollout is still due to be undertaken, with a managed migration process for remaining legacy benefit customers – however this may not be commencing in our Districts, for 1-2 years.

8.3 The table below updates on DHP spend to the 31st March 2021.

LA	Total funding = Central Government DHP Grant 2020/21	DHP net spend as at 31 March 2021	DHP committed for 2020/21	DHP Total spend for 2020/21	% Grant spend	Unallocated DHP Grant
City of Lincoln	£250,113	N/A	N/A	£226,635	90.61%	£23,478
North Kesteven	£172,612	N/A	N/A	£136,068	78.82%	£36,544

8.5 Despite not spending the full allocation of central government DHP grant in 2020/21, spend was still £21,303 higher than in 2019/20 for Lincoln and £5,640 higher than in 2019/20 for North Kesteven. The team has been, as always, extremely proactive at publicising, assessing and awarding DHPs.

8.6 The table below breaks down the number of DHP applications received and determined up to 31st March 2021.

DHP applications – Year 2020/21	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven
Total number awarded	589 <i>(2019/20 = 575)</i>	293 <i>(2019/20 = 331)</i>
No. awarded for Housing Benefit	349 <i>(2019/20 = 345)</i>	144 <i>(2019/20 = 202)</i>
No. awarded for Universal Credit	240 <i>(2019/20 = 230)</i>	149 <i>(2019/20 = 129)</i>
Average DHP award	£384.78 <i>(2019/20 = £357.10)</i>	£464.40 <i>(2019/20 = £397.64)</i>

8.7 An internal DHP working group continues to review DHP procedures with the aim of ensuring that those most in need of additional help with their housing costs receive appropriate support.

The team has reviewed our DHP policy for the new financial year 2021/22, with a view to allocating central government grant effectively under the backdrop of Covid-19 recovery.

8.8 Due to Covid, there has been a temporary suspension of evictions and house moves, which has resulted in authorities seeing an underspend in their DHP. Officers undertook the following actions to address this:

- Reports sent to both Lincoln and North Kesteven Housing Teams which identified those customers that had a shortfall but no DHP currently in payment;
- Lincoln Housing contacted tenants and supported with telephone applications;
- Communications was sent out to advise the public to apply if they met the criteria;
- Email sent to all large private landlords advising them of budget left and the new quick way to apply;
- Amended DHP guidance on the application process (shortened form created), backdating and amount of award; and
- All staff within Benefits, Customer Services, Welfare Team, Housing Departments and Homeless Departments proactively promoted DHP's.

8.9 2021/22 DHP government grants are as follows:

- City of Lincoln: £138,379
- North Kesteven: £95,525

However, these initial allocations are only based on 71% of the national grant allocation – a mid-year review is to take place nationally and further DHP grants awarded to local authorities as appropriate.

9. Council Tax Hardship Fund

9.1. As part of its response to COVID-19, the Government announced in the Budget on 11th March 2020 that it would provide local authorities in England with £500m of new grant funding to support economically vulnerable people and households in their local area.

The expectation was that the majority of the hardship fund would be used to provide council tax relief, alongside existing local Council Tax Support schemes for 2020/21. The Guidance notes were released on 24th March 2020 with confirmation of the grant allocation.

Grant allocation was made based on the Council Tax Support (CTS) working age caseload and City of Lincoln were awarded £1,209,846, and North Kesteven £535,715.

Amounts spent up to 21st May 2021 – paid towards the year 2020/21:

City of Lincoln Council £678,946 towards 3,893 individual Council Tax accounts

North Kesteven £279,681 towards 2,562 individual Council Tax accounts

9.2 The remaining balance of the awards will be allocated towards helping the most vulnerable with further council tax relief alongside existing local Council Tax Support schemes for the year 2021/22.

Modelling is currently taking place to establish how to help the most vulnerable with a real urgency to get this delivered as soon as possible.

City of Lincoln Council approximately £530,899 to spend;

North Kesteven approximately £256,033 to spend.

10. Strategic Priorities

10.1 **City of Lincoln: Let's drive economic growth and North Kesteven: Our economy and Our Community:** An understanding of Universal Credit and its wider impacts on City of Lincoln residents and arrears levels is important when reducing poverty and driving economic growth across the City. The aim of Universal Credit is to provide a simplified means tested benefits system, with the objective of avoiding the 'poverty trap', where there is a disincentive to work longer hours because of the loss of benefits and higher taxes.

10.2 **City of Lincoln: Let's drive economic growth and North Kesteven: Our economy and Our Community:** - A key role in reducing inequality by ensuring residents receive the benefits they are entitled to and providing money / debt advice. There are strategic priorities when engaging with those in receipt of Welfare Benefits, Digital Inclusion, Channel Shift/ Customer Experience, Financial Inclusion and Partnership Working are all key priorities as part of this report.

11. Organisational Impacts

11.1 **Finance:** There are no direct financial implications arising as a result of this report.

11.2 **Legal implications inc Procurement Rules:** There are no direct Legal or Procurement implications arising from this report.

12. Risk Implications

12.1 The Councils bear the risk of local authority rent arrears which are not fully recovered.

13. Recommendation

13.1 Joint Committee notes this report – and that an update will be presented at the next meeting of this Committee.

Key Decision No

Do the Exempt Information Categories Apply No

Call In and Urgency: Is the decision one to which Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules apply? No

Does the report contain Appendices? No

**If Yes, how many
Appendices?**

None

**List of Background
Papers:**

No

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