

Revenues and Benefits Shared Service

Martin Walmsley, Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits

Business Plan - 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025



Overview

Services delivered by this Area

The functional services within the area cover:

The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service delivers Revenues and Benefits functions for City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council. This includes;

- Collection of Council Tax;
- Collection of Business Rates (also collecting for West Lindsey District Council);
- Processing of Housing Benefit / Council Tax Support claims;
- Processing of Discretionary Housing Payment applications;
- Collection of City of Lincoln Business Improvement District levy;
- Welfare/Benefits/Money advice;
- Recovery of Housing Benefit overpayments;
- Recovery of other incomes (currently only for City of Lincoln – former tenant arrears, sundry debtors);
- Welfare Reform and Cost of Living Support;
- Benefit appeals;
- Proactive and joined-up responses to anti-poverty, financial inclusion and tenancy sustainment matters;
- Partnership working on employment and skills projects;
- Key links into and delivery of corporate fraud projects.

The shared service has a Housing Benefit caseload of nearly 6,500, a Council Tax Support caseload of nearly 14,000, and bills more than 102,000 domestic and almost 10,100 commercial properties.

V1 Prepared by: M.Walmsley, 2nd February 2024

Agreement date:

1st Review date: To be considered by Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee,
22nd February 2024

2nd Review date:

3rd Review date:

Director's comments:

Section One: Key achievements in 2023/24

A. Key activities delivered include:

Key activities	Completed by	Summary of outcome achieved
Delivery of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service between City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council - opportunities to deliver other work areas and continue to develop and manage positive relationship with West Lindsey District Council	Shared service	Positive management and ongoing review of existing partnership arrangements with West Lindsey District Council. 2023/24 budget for the Revenues and Benefits shared service delivering savings for the partner local authorities.
Optimising performance levels with reference to impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living challenges, particularly around Council Tax and Business Rates in-year collection, and increased number of Benefits/ Universal Credit applications	Shared service	Generally positive levels of in-year collection achieved. Benefits claim processing times performing ahead of national averages. Reduction in level of outstanding Revenues-related work. New DHP guidelines, with reduced government grants, managed and monitored
Reacting to funding challenges in 2023/24 – e.g. in respect of Housing Benefit Administration Subsidy, DLUHC Council Tax Support grant, New Burdens grant/s, DHP's etc	Assistant Director Shared Revenues and Benefits	Effective utilisation of New Burdens funding and careful vacancy management, to ensure Shared Service continued to deliver savings for partner local authorities.
The shared service supported (and led	Shared service	Ensuring residents and businesses incomes are maximised, wherever possible.

Key activities	Completed by	Summary of outcome achieved
on many) the authorities' cost-of-living responses, working with other service areas to provide proactive responses to specifically lead on and deliver any further government funded support schemes		<p>Clear communication and delivery of/ signposting to relevant initiatives and responses.</p> <p>Prompt, accurate and effective delivery of numerous government-funded support schemes.</p> <p>Working in partnership with other Lincolnshire Councils and voluntary sector organisations, to deliver Household Support Fund wave 4 2023/24.</p> <p>Delivery Alternate Funds for household energy bills.</p> <p>Delivery of Retail Hospitality & Leisure Relief (@75%) for Business Rates, as well as other Business Rates changes – including national revaluation exercise.</p> <p>Identification and delivery of cost of living initiatives, utilising UK Shared Prosperity Fund monies.</p>
Supporting the reducing all types of inequality and Our Economy strategic priorities by actively engaging with employment and skills projects and food poverty organisations, - for example, The Network, Lincoln College, Restart, DWP, LFIP	Shared service	Demonstrable contribution to creating and signposting training and employment opportunities by working with partner organisations.
Embedment, promotion and enhancement of new NEC self-serve modules	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Revenues and Benefits Support and Systems	Increased usage of self-serve modules by residents and businesses.

Key activities	Completed by	Summary of outcome achieved
	Team Leader	
Revenues and Benefits assurance	Revenues and Benefits Manager, Subsidy and Quality Control Lead Officer Revenues and Benefits Manager	Achievement of 100% subsidy on local authority error overpayments in respect of 2022/23 claims. Reduction of levels of error in Benefits assessments. Active participation in National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data match schemes. Delivery of Single Person Discount review, - also assessing options for a potential Single Person Discount rolling review initiative.

B. Savings initiatives completed or started include:

Key savings initiative	Completed by - service area	Summary of outcome achieved
Shared Service collaboration – savings mainly from staffing restructure and ICT system change	Shared service	The shared service is delivering savings for both authorities. Income from partnership arrangements with West Lindsey District Council. Reduction in Benefits Officer resources to take into account decrease in central government funding.

C. All other key achievements

Include in this section any other achievements – for example, independent reviews, awards, nominations etc.
Audit Lincolnshire assurances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing Benefit Subsidy Testing 2022/23 – Substantial Assurance

Section Two: Key activities in the group's forward plans for 2024/25

Agreed delivery projects

Key activity	Outcome/savings sought	Owner	Timescale
Delivery of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service between City of Lincoln Council and North Kesteven District Council - opportunities to deliver other work areas and positively nurture relationship with West Lindsey District Council	Ongoing shared service, further development of operations of the service – looking for potential enhancements and growth for service, wherever possible	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
	Positively review current partnership arrangements with other local authorities and organisations	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
	The 2024/25 budget for the Revenues and Benefits shared service will continue to deliver savings for the partner local authorities	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
Performance improvement required in terms of Revenues outstanding workloads, developing appropriate action plans where required	Reduction in outstanding workloads – aiming to work within two weeks/ as close as practicable	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager	Throughout 2024/25
Maintenance/ improvement of performance levels in Council Tax and Non Domestic Rate collection rates, Housing Benefit processing times/accuracy and outstanding workloads, and Housing Benefits overpayment collection	Maintenance and/or improvement of current in-year collection levels and Benefits processing times, however reference will need to be made in relation to reasonably achievable performance levels due to cost of living impacts	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager	Throughout 2024/25
Reacting to funding challenges in 2024/25 –	To ensure that the budget is managed throughout 2024/25	Assistant Director –	Throughout 2023/24

Key activity	Outcome/savings sought	Owner	Timescale
e.g. in respect of Housing Benefit Administration Subsidy, New Burdens grant/s, Discretionary Housing Payments etc	and responses made accordingly, as well as preparation of a budget for 2025/26	Shared Revenues and Benefits	
To ensure the service helps to support the authorities cost-of-living responses, leading on and working with other service areas to provide proactive responses and working in conjunction with UK Shared Prosperity Fund schemes	Ensuring residents and businesses incomes are maximised, wherever possible	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
	Clear communication and delivery of/ signposting to relevant initiatives and responses	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
	Prompt, accurate and effective delivery of government-funded support schemes	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
	Ownership of customer cases, with a focus on positive and tangible outcomes	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Welfare Reform & Project Officer	Throughout 2024/25
	Analysing and delivery of cost of living / local welfare provision and schemes in light of government announcements (potentially with reference to Spring Budget 2024)	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Timescales to be confirmed, once information/ guidance available
To support the reducing all types of inequality strategic priority and our communities strategic priority by actively	Demonstrable contribution to creating and signposting training and employment opportunities by working with partner organisations.	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and	Throughout 2024/25

Key activity	Outcome/savings sought	Owner	Timescale
engaging with employment and skills projects and food poverty organisations, - for example, The Network, Lincoln College, Restart, DWP, LFIP		Benefits	
To further embed, promote and enhance NEC self-service modules	Increased usage of self-serve modules by residents and businesses	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Revenues and Benefits Support and Systems Team Leader	Throughout 2024/25
Delivery of Council Tax Support schemes, and further development of potentially income-banded schemes for 2025/26	Ensuring Council Tax Support schemes reach those most in need of this support, with clear, efficient and customer-focused schemes in place	Revenues and Benefits Manager, Subsidy and Quality Control Lead Officer Revenues and Benefits Manager	Throughout 2024/25, with assessment of scheme options for 2025/26 in advance of January 2025
To work alongside Lincolnshire colleagues to bring forward a solution for the delivery of a rolling Single Person Discount process, if possible. Otherwise to propose a solution for the LiNK partnership.	Incorrect Single Person Discounts removed from accounts promptly and accurately	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager	In advance of and throughout 2024/25

Key activity	Outcome/savings sought	Owner	Timescale
Undertake a proactive response to Universal Credit migration, managing impact and communication with teams and other stakeholders	Ensuring internal and external stakeholders are aware of impacts of moving to Universal Credit, and support the transition / mitigate impacts wherever possible and appropriate	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25
Ensuring all aspects of DWP Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) are reviewed and compliance achieved or working towards compliance	Annual sign-off of DWP MOU	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Throughout 2024/25

D. Strategic priority schemes and any additional Leadership priorities

Service	Key activity/project	Outcomes sought	Owner	Timescale
Revenues and Benefits shared service	Vision 2025/Reducing Inequality	Identify projects for 2024/25 ensuring these are delivered on time and within any associated budget	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	In advance of and throughout 2024/25
Revenues and Benefits shared service	NK Plan 2023-26	Identify projects for 2024/25 ensuring these are delivered on time and within any associated budget	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	In advance of and throughout 2024/25

E. Towards Financial Sustainability projects

* **Strands:** Withdrawal of services (**W**); cost cutting/reviewing services (**R**); collaborative working (**C**); fair & appropriate charging (**FC**); procurement & commissioning (**P**); asset rationalisation (**A**)

Service	Key activity	Strand (*)	Outcome/savings sought	Owner	Timescale
Revenues and Benefits Shared Service	Continuing active consideration of other shared service options – e.g. other areas of work, potential opportunities	R/C	Efficiencies/savings through shared service opportunities	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits	Prior to and throughout 2024/25
Revenues and Benefits Shared	Contribution to corporate savings	R	Efficiencies/savings through shared	Assistant Director –	Prior to and

Service	targets/initiatives, as required		service opportunities	Shared Revenues and Benefits	through out 2024/25
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F. Other agreed delivery projects

N/A

Service	Activity	Outcomes sought	Owner	Timescale

Section Three: Other Service Planning considerations in 2024/25

G. Key risks for the area

Risks from Service Managers and those allocated from CMT strategic risk register	Action we will take to mitigate the risk	Who and by When?
Failure to maintain performance / current levels of Council Tax and Business Rates Collection on behalf of the Shared Service	Controls in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance targets/measures reviewed in advance of 2024/25, to take account of Covid-19 impacts • Performance is monitored and managed on a regular basis • Impacts of cost of living challenges proactively analysed and responded to accordingly • Regular reporting into Revenues and Benefits Management Team, Revenue and Benefits Operational Board, Joint Committee • Effective management of daily workflow • Range of customer experience initiatives ongoing such as e-billing, online Council Tax DD forms, other integrated e-forms and NEC self-serve modules (implemented in second- 	

Risks from Service Managers and those allocated from CMT strategic risk register	Action we will take to mitigate the risk	Who and by When?
	<p>half of 2022/23)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Tax Support Schemes approved January 2024 <p>Further action required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing challenge of working practices and moving resources to areas of demand. • Continue to review of staffing arrangements and 'pressure points' in advance of and throughout 2024/25 • Review Council Tax Support Scheme 2023/24 and options for 2024/25, then 2025/26 • Review of Exceptional Hardship Fund 2023/24 and options for 2024/25, then 2025/26 • Further embedding and enhancement of Citizens Access self-serve functionality in 2024/25 	<p>Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager – Throughout 2024/25</p>
<p>Failure to provide timely and accurate assessment of Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing payment applications on behalf of the Shared Service</p>	<p>Controls in place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily management of workload through Document Management System • Processes in place to deal with claims 'on demand' wherever possible • Rolling review of subsidy data from NEC System • Management of incoming work and processes to minimise value of overpayments raised • Training and mentoring of staff • Review of subsidy-quality assurance 	<p>Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager – Throughout 2024/25</p>

Risks from Service Managers and those allocated from CMT strategic risk register	Action we will take to mitigate the risk	Who and by When?
	<p>processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More targeted and efficient quality control mechanisms, improving accuracy levels and rolling training plan to address any training requirement • Performance and quality assurance framework in place • HB New Claims process review project plan scoped and implemented <p>Further action required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued monitoring of resource allocation – e.g. HB /CTS, Universal Support and other Benefits-related projects, to also take account of cost of living challenges impacts 	
Failure to respond to government initiatives to mitigate impact of covid/cost of living	<p>Controls in place:</p> <p>Customers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Get in touch, not in debt’ message promoted • Staffing resources (re)-allocated to areas of demand • Welfare Reform support and Welfare Benefits/Advice functions in place • Channels of customer access regular reviewed and changes implemented – e.g. e-forms, self-serve modules • Lead role in Lincolnshire Financial Inclusion 	Assistant Director – Shared Revenues and Benefits, Revenues and Benefits Manager – Throughout 2024/25

Risks from Service Managers and those allocated from CMT strategic risk register	Action we will take to mitigate the risk	Who and by When?
	<p>Partnership (FIP), and various Cost of living groups – internal and external</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective partnerships with public and third sector bodies • Effective communications regarding cost of living support matters • Regular liaison with Department for Work and Pensions and Citizens Advice re UC support arrangements • Review of structure of cost of living meetings/resources - AD SRB Q1 2023/24 • Embedding cost of living support throughout Councils through effective communications and distribution of support tools and advice • Fixed-term Cost of Living Co-Ordinator role now in post • Household Support Fund 4 2023/24 being delivered in waves • UK Shared Prosperity Fund cost of living initiatives being identified/delivered <p>Further controls required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK Shared Prosperity Fund cost of living initiatives to be identified/delivered in 2024/25 	

Risks from Service Managers and those allocated from CMT strategic risk register	Action we will take to mitigate the risk	Who and by When?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysing and delivery of cost of living / local welfare provision and schemes in light of government announcements (potentially with reference to Spring Budget 2024) Ensuring internal and external stakeholders are aware of impacts of moving to Universal Credit, and support the transition / mitigate impacts wherever possible and appropriate Considering cost of living support arrangements for 2024/25, in light of potential reduced funding – e.g. if Household Support Fund ends after 31st March 2024 	

H. Performance Management

Performance	Planned action	Service
What are the key plans for ensuring reported performance is of good quality		
What service measures do you want to see reviewed this year		

Performance	Planned action	Service
<p>Strong and robust performance reporting arrangements are established and embedded in the Revenues and Benefits shared service – a detailed spreadsheet of performance data and management information is completed monthly and reviewed/challenged by the Assistant Director Shared Revenues and Benefits and Revenues & Benefits Manager. Performance is a standing agenda item at Revenues & Benefits Management Team (RBMT) meetings.</p> <p>Service measures are continually reviewed to ensure the most appropriate performance areas are being reported to Members and Corporate Management Teams – a further review is required in advance of 2024/25, to ensure all measures are still appropriate and whether and also that targets/measures take appropriate account of the ongoing impacts of cost of living challenges.</p>		

H. Statutory duties – Equality and Diversity; Safeguarding (Children and Adults at risk)

This should include appropriate actions that will be closely monitored in order to meet your equality objectives under the Equality Act 2010, and in particular the Public Sector Equality Duties; as well as safeguarding duties.

Key actions within your services that are being under-taken as part of the Equality Objective Action Plan – progress and plans for the coming year
Ongoing review of equal access to services provided by LiNK – e.g. interpretation, leaflets in other formats/languages, etc.
What key actions are services taking to close significant Equality Information gaps?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of language interpretation telephone line service • Ongoing review of availability of Revenues and Benefits correspondence in other formats.
List the policies and strategies to receive an Equality Analysis this year where Assistant Director sign off is required
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Tax Support Schemes for 2025/26. • Discretionary Housing Payment policy (if required).
What actions need to be taken to meet the area's Safeguarding Duties? How will the delivery of your services take into account the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and vulnerable adults?
<p>Ensure appropriate staff in the shared service receive/ have received (refresher) training on safeguarding requirements and processes, as required.</p> <p>In line with corporate training place, ensure any new/ refresher Safetalk/ ASIST training takes place, as required.</p>

I. Working in Neighbourhoods

How are you, as Assistant Director, going to engage with the neighbourhood agenda? In which specific services will you ensure there is a focus on
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neighbourhood working?
The Welfare and Welfare Reform Support/Cost of Living Team within the shared service have specific roles of working with neighbourhoods/communities via a variety of channels, providing benefits, money and debt advice, and cost of living support/solutions. Assistant Director Shared Revenues and Benefits has key links into Sincil Bank revitalisation projects, in particular in relation to Employment and Skills –related initiatives. The service also engages with the communities and the voluntary sector, working with other Lincolnshire Councils as appropriate. Assistant Director Shared Revenues and Benefits is currently Chair of Lincolnshire Financial Inclusion Partnership (FIP), looking at neighbourhood-wide, district/s-wide and countywide financial inclusion initiatives.

J. Workforce Development

Workforce Development	Planned action	Service
What are the key plans for training and developing staff?		
Proactive response to changing climate in relation to Revenues and Benefits	Ongoing review of job roles, skill sets and staff development/training requirements	Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Proactive support for hybrid working model	To continue embedding hybrid working model, communicating effectively with all team members	Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Improving workforce capability	Staff appraisals throughout 2024/25	Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
City of Lincoln Council Workforce Development Strategy / One Council Organisational Development Pillar	Delivery of actions as required within the Strategy action plan / Throughout 2024/25	Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Delivery of 'Handling Difficult Situations' training through an external provider	Training being delivered in Quarter 4 2023/24, potentially further sessions in 2024/25	Revenues and Benefits Shared Service

L. Social Value

Social Value	Planned action	Service
What are the key plans for delivering social value through your services?		

Social Value	Planned action	Service
Assistant Director Shared Revenues and Benefits has a full understanding of Social Value and will ensure this is considered going forward in any procurement / contracts relating to the shared service, and is currently working to help deliver social value in relation to cost of living project/s.		

M. Data Protection and Information Governance

Data Protection and Information Governance	Planned action	Service
What are the key plans/ considerations in respect of Data Protection and Information Governance in respect of your services?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure ongoing compliance from all staff – a high volume of sensitive and confidential data is held within the shared service - Working with Information Governance Lead Officer to ensure ongoing review of data held within the service and that appropriate Information Sharing Agreements are in place - General Data Protection Regulation – Working with IT and Legal Services, to ensure Revenues and Benefits shared service continues to comply with GDPR - Ensure continuing adherence to requirements of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Department for Work and Pensions, with annual sign-off of MoUs for both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven, - audit taking place in Quarter 1 2024/25 by DWP. 		

N. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate Social Responsibility	Planned action	Service
Can you support the council in its approach to CSR?		
Through the nature of the Revenues and Benefits Service's work, there are significant opportunities to link into CSR activities – including support for The Network, working with foodbanks, and various voluntary sector organisations.		