

SUBJECT: PERFORMANCE UPDATE

DIRECTORATE: CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND TOWN CLERK

REPORT AUTHOR: MARTIN WALMSLEY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update on performance in the Revenues and Benefits shared service.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides an update on Revenues and Benefits performance, in respect of annual outturns for the financial year 2023/24.
- 2.2 The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service has now been in operation for thirteen years, forming on 1st June 2011. Levels of performance have largely been maintained and improved whilst continuing to provide value for money. Continual improvement and success is being achieved in terms of both statistical and financial performance, as well as positive outcomes for customers of the partner local authorities. However, the Covid-19 global pandemic and then cost of living challenges have understandably impacted on some areas of performance, - these impacts are likely to continue for many more months.

3. Background

- 3.1 At the 22nd February 2024 meeting of this Committee, a report was presented detailing Revenues and Benefits performance up to the end of Quarter 3 2023/24.
- 3.2 Performance is reported to this Committee on a quarterly basis.

4. Revenues Performance

4.1 Council Tax

- 4.2 For the financial year 2023/24, in-year collection for Lincoln and North Kesteven is down by 0.11% and up by 0.07% respectively, compared to 2022/23.
- 4.3 The table below showing how performance has progressed, over the last ten financial years.

Financial Year	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
City of Lincoln	94.04%	94.15%	94.00%	94.78%	96.77%	96.76%	97.17%	97.09%	97.12%	96.93%
North Kesteven	98.48%	98.41%	98.38%	98.03%	98.89%	99.08%	99.20%	99.14%	99.16%	99.25%

- 4.4 Net collectable debit for 2023/24 (compared to 2022/23) increased by £2,795,216 for Lincoln and £4,654,674 for North Kesteven.

4.5 Although performance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels of collection, cost of living pressures on residents have to be taken into account. Evidence locally on as well as on a wider national basis is showing that more people are struggling to pay Council Tax and that this could continue for some time. Officers continue to ensure Council Tax is collected proactively, however with the importance of also looking to ensure taxpayers are receiving all the help (e.g. discounts, benefits) they are entitled to, and making payment arrangements to take account of residents' welfare and avoiding undue exceptional hardship. Officers continue to benchmark in-year Council Tax collection with other local authorities, and national collection rates for 2023/24 should be publicly available for inclusion in the next report to this Committee on 5th September 2024.

4.6 **Business Rates**

4.7 For the financial year 2023/24 in-year collection for Lincoln is down by 0.87%, North Kesteven down by 0.31% and West Lindsey up by 0.95%. It should be noted that performance in financial years since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic is not wholly comparable 'like for like' due to differing levels of discounts/reliefs available, - however all three collection outturns are positive – particularly in light of the economic climate and significant challenges for businesses over the last few years.

4.8 The table below showing how performance has progressed, over the last ten financial years.

Financial Year	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
City of Lincoln	98.32%	99.19%	98.45%	98.97%	98.89%	99.81%	98.87%	99.43%	99.78%	99.46%
North Kesteven	99.03%	99.34%	99.74%	97.21%	99.43%	99.42%	99.89%	99.09%	99.46%	99.78%
West Lindsey	98.34%	97.39%	96.75%	97.90%	98.88%	98.63%	98.53%	97.34%	99.44%	99.17%

4.9 **Outstanding Revenues Documents**

4.10 As at the end of the financial year 2023/24, outstanding Revenues documents stood at a total of 2,679 (split Lincoln 1,745, North Kesteven 934). This figure is higher than at the end of 2022/23 (total 935 – split Lincoln 637, North Kesteven 298), however with significant demands on the team plus recruitment having only just taken place in respect of vacant positions – the team has performed well. As expected, Quarter 4 2023/24 (as is always the case in the final quarter of the financial year) brought extremely high levels of customer contact – mainly due to issuing annual Council Tax and Business Rates bills.

As at the time of writing this report, direction of travel in respect of reducing outstanding documents is positive in 2024/25.

Also, it should be noted that from 2024/25 Revenues items outstanding will also include those from the Citizens Access Revenues self-serve portal, so there will effectively be a new 'baseline' for this measure of performance.

4.11 To give some context as to the workload of the Revenues Team, in 2023/24 110,970 items of correspondence were received, as well as 39,805 telephone calls taken.

4.12 Housing Benefit Overpayments

4.13 As at the end of the financial year 2023/24, in-year collection rates and outstanding monies are as shown in the table below:

Financial year 2023/24 outturn	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven
In-year collection rate	118.30%	113.36%
Amount collected	£846,401	£460,615
Outstanding Housing Benefit overpayments debt	£2,199,302	£1,181,329

4.14 Performance in this area continues to be positive – outstanding debt continues to decrease and in-period collection is exceeding 100% for both partner Councils.

4.15 The table below shows how outstanding Housing Benefit overpayments debt has decreased since 2018, when previously this had been rising. This is a result of a review of practices and processes in this area, dedicated resources being allocated to tackle this issue, partnership working with Department for Work and Pensions to look at this area, as well as a reduction in overpayments being raised.

Financial Year	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
City of Lincoln	£2,199,302	£2,458,833	£2,661,801	£3,153,505	£3,573,112	£3,973,125	£4,219,349	£4,081,552	£3,510,798	£3,186,971
North Kesteven	£1,181,329	£1,267,664	£1,418,662	£1,471,374	£1,530,967	£1,643,394	£1,824,908	£1,793,997	£1,482,271	£1,324,672

5. Benefits Performance

5.1 As at the end of the financial year 2023/24, there were 3,449 Benefits customers outstanding (awaiting assessment) – split Lincoln 2,281, North Kesteven 1,168. This is a rise on numbers outstanding at the end of 2022/23 (2,720 – split Lincoln 1,792, North Kesteven 928). It should be recognised that demands on the team have continued to be significant throughout the year, not only having to keep on top of the incoming workload, but delivering other schemes such as the Household Support Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, as well as advice to customers around cost of living support. The number of Universal Credit (UC) documents requiring processing continues to have a real impact on the team too, and is likely to increase moving forward. At points there have been reductions in Benefits Officer resources too, due to vacancies and sickness absence.

Despite the significant increase in incoming work items to be processed during Quarter 4 2023/24, for example rent increases and benefits upratings, as at the time of writing this report the oldest item of work outstanding is 4 weeks.

5.2 Despite the team's workload, due to efficient and proactive processes in place, Benefit claims were assessed on a timely basis – as shown in the table below.

Financial Year 2023/24	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven
New Claims – average time to process	14.32 days (2022/23 15.85 days)	17.60 days (2022/23 19.18 days)
Changes of Circumstance – average time to process	3.42 days (2022/23 3.08 days)	2.86 days (2022/23 2.77 days)

Average processing times for Housing Benefit New Claims has decreased by 1.53 days and 1.58 days for Lincoln and North Kesteven, respectively.

To give some context, the latest national data available shows that in Quarter 3 2022/23 New Claims were processed in an average of 18 days by Councils, with Changes of Circumstance being processed in an average of 8 calendar days (although it should be noted for Changes of Circumstance the average normally decreases in Quarter 4, due to high volumes of '1-day' changes processed due to annual rent, pension changes, etc). This helps to reaffirm the positive nature of Lincoln and North Kesteven average processing times.

Despite the improvement from 2022/23 to 2023/24, the aim is to further improve North Kesteven New Claims performance. 2023/24 performance was detrimentally affected by some landlords delaying in providing information required regarding rents, - officers will continue to try and prevent this occurring moving forward. Also, with the demographics and make-up of the North Kesteven caseload having fewer new claims than City of Lincoln and less temporary/supported accommodation claims, it is difficult to compare performance as exactly 'like for like' between the two authorities.

- 5.3 The importance in processing Benefits claims accurately remains of paramount importance, – i.e. 'getting it right, first time.' In 2023/24, City of Lincoln's 'right first time' performance regarding assessment of cases checked is 93.05% (2,437 out of 2,619) and for North Kesteven 98.68% (1,119 out of 1,134). City of Lincoln's performance improved throughout the year – in quarter 1 an increased number of checks had taken place including in respect of less experienced team members.

It should be noted that these checks are in addition to those carried out through the checks required to be carried out under the requirements of the annual Housing Benefit Subsidy claims.

6. Welfare and Benefits Advice

- 6.1 The table below shows the vital monies that our Welfare Team has continued to assist customers to access during 2023/24 (comparing to 2022/23). The demographics and demands are different between the two districts, with Covid-19 undoubtedly having an impact in North Kesteven where home visits (which had pre-Covid been key in offering welfare/benefits advice) not being possible to deliver in the same way – and new ways of working as residents access Councils' services in different ways. Officers continue to review demands and processes for the Welfare Team.

	City of Lincoln		North Kesteven	
	2023/24	2022/23	2023/24	2022/23
Advice provided enabling weekly value of additional benefits	£31,246	£28,257	£18,433	£10,094
Advice provided enabling lump sum award of additional benefits	£347,975	£299,598	£235,469	£143,282
No. of customers to whom help provided	6,324	7,637	2,032	1,571
No. money advice referrals	157	127	84	49

7. Strategic Priorities

7.1 Both City of Lincoln and North Kesteven have a number of strategic priorities. Three that have an impact on the Revenues and Benefits Service are:-

- Lincoln: “Let’s reduce all kinds of inequality.”
- North Kesteven: “Our Communities,” “Our Economy.”

7.2 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, Employment, Skills and Partnership Working are all key priorities for the shared service.

8. Organisational Impacts

8.1 Finance:

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

8.2 Legal Implications including Procurement Rules

There are no direct Legal or Procurement implications arising from this report.

8.3 Equality, Diversity & Human Rights

There are no direct implications arising from this report.

9. Risk Implications

9.1 A Risk Register is in place for the Revenues and Benefits shared service.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Note the performance information as set out in this report.

10.2 Note that a performance update will be presented at the next meeting of this committee on 5th September 2024.

Is this a key decision? No

Do the exempt information categories apply? No

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

How many appendices does the report contain? Appendix 1: Performance Data for the Financial Year 2023/24

List of Background Papers: None

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