Present:	Councillor Mary Green *(in the Chair)*, Councillor Rebecca Longbottom, Councillor Donald Nannestad and Councillor Sally Tarry
Apologies for Absence:	Councillor Naomi Tweddle

51. Councillor Sue Burke

Members and officers paid tribute to Sue, former City of Lincoln Councillor and member of Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee who sadly passed away on 2 January 2025. She was a genuine very kind person, warm and welcoming who would be greatly missed. Thanks were given for her commitment towards the Revenues and Benefits service and for sharing her valuable knowledge at all times.

52. Confirmation of Minutes - 05 December 2024

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 05 December 2024 be confirmed and signed by the Chair as a true record, subject to the following amendments being noted:

- That one figure for outstanding benefits customers awaiting assessment at the end of Quarter 2 at the same point the previous year at 1,697 had been omitted at the third paragraph, Page 5, Minute Number 47, 'Performance Update' as the figures quoted did not total that stated.
- The text of the last paragraph of page 5 of Minute No 47, Performance Update' was duplicated in error.

53. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Rebecca Longbottom declared a Personal Interest with regard to the agenda item titled 'Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan 2025/26'.

Reason: Her place of employment, Lincoln College, was mentioned within the report papers, however, there was no conflict of interest.

54. Performance Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee with an update on performance in the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Decision

That the report be noted, with an update to be presented to the next meeting of the Committee on 29 May 2025.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report provided an update on Revenues and Benefits performance in respect of Quarter 3 for the financial year 2024/25.

The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service had now been in operation for thirteen years forming on 1 June 2011, and performance had largely been maintained and improved, whilst it continued to provide value for money. Continual improvement and success was being achieved in 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 had understandably impacted on some areas of performance and these impacts were likely to continue for some time.

In respect of Council Tax, up to the end of Quarter 3 2024/25, in-year collection for Lincoln was down by 0.09% and North Kesteven down by 0.65% respectively. As at the end of January 2025, in- year collection was still down at 0.16% for Lincoln and 0.68% for North Kesteven respectively. As previously flagged to this committee, Council Tax collection was generally lower at both regional and national levels - seeming to indicate that some taxpayers were struggling to pay their bills as a consequence of cost of living pressures. Officers would continue to proactively recover Council Tax during Quarter 4 whilst understanding the importance of welfare and avoidance of undue financial hardship for taxpayers.

In terms of the national context, the latest figures for annual Council Tax in-year collection outturns 2023/24 saw City of Lincoln Council at 246th (2022/23- 240th) and North Kesteven 20th (2022/23 - 9th) out of 296 local authorities whose performance was reported. Out of the seven Lincolnshire Districts, for 2023/24 City of Lincoln and North Kesteven achieved 6th and 1st highest collections, respectively.

In respect of Business Rates, up to the end of Quarter 3 2024/25 compared to the same point in 2023/24, in-year collection was up by 0.12% for Lincoln; North Kesteven down by 0.94% and West Lindsey down by 4.20%. As at the end of January 2025, in- year collection was up at 0.29% for Lincoln, down by 1.29% for North Kesteven and down by 2.56% for West Lindsey respectively.

In terms of the national context, the latest available figures were for annual Business Rates in-year collection outturns 2023/24. City of Lincoln Council's in-year collection was 96th *(2022/23 22nd),* North Kesteven 39th *(2022/23 14th)* and West Lindsey 95th *(2022/23 22nd)* out of 296 local authorities whose performance was reported. Out of the seven Lincolnshire Districts, for 2023/24, City of Lincoln, North Kesteven and West Lindsey achieved 4th, 2nd and 3rd highest collections, respectively.

Officers would continue to proactively recover Business Rates during Quarter 4 2024/25 whilst understanding the economic climate and challenges for the business sector. It should also be noted that collection had been 'skewed' somewhat in recent financial years due to varying criteria/awards of the Expanded Retail Discount (ERD).

The number of outstanding Revenues Customers at the end of Quarter 3 2024/25 was 1,991 (split Lincoln 1,209, North Kesteven 782), showing a positive direction of travel - the total outstanding figure was 3,365 at the end of Quarter 2 2024/25.

As previously highlighted to this Committee, it should also be noted that from 2024/25 Revenues items outstanding also included those from the Citizens Access Revenues self-serve portal, so there would effectively be a new ‘baseline’ for this measure of performance

To give some context as to the workload of the Revenues Team, in Quarter 3 2024/25 13,915 items of post were received, 6,723 telephone calls taken, and 5,691 e-mails received.

As at the end of Quarter 3 2024/25, in period collection of Housing Benefit overpayments stood at City of Lincoln 119.88%, and North Kesteven 92.06%.

Outstanding Housing Benefit overpayments debt also continued to decrease overall. As at the end of Quarter 3 2024/25: at £1,849, 874 for City of Lincoln and £1,078,594 for North Kesteven.

As at the end of Quarter 3 2024/25, there were 1,215 Benefits customers outstanding and awaiting assessment (split Lincoln 868, North Kesteven 347), showing a positive direction of travel, the total outstanding figure was 2,554 at the end of Quarter 2 2024/25. Demands on the team continued to be significant, particularly in relation to (but not exclusively) Universal Credit related information impacting on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims. Also. benefits officers were working on other schemes such as Discretionary Housing Payments and Household Support Fund.

Despite the significant demands on the Benefits Team, officers continued to turn around claims and reported changes of circumstance promptly, and accurately. As at the end of Quarter 3 2024/25 City of Lincoln turned around new benefits claims in 13.23 days and North Kesteven in 17.00 days respectively. As at the end of January 2025, City of Lincoln turned around new benefits claims in 13.20 days and North Kesteven in 16.57 days respectively. Changes of circumstances notifications were dealt with by City of Lincoln in 4.77 days and 6.35 days for North Kesteven respectively. As at the end of January 2025, City of Lincoln turned around changes of circumstances claims in 4.29 days and North Kesteven in 5.32 days respectively As of today, 26 February 2025, figures for new benefits claims were slightly up however, this was predictable as there was more work at this time of the financial year.

To give this position some context, the latest national data available showed that in Quarter 2 2024/25 New Claims were processed in an average of 21 days by Councils, with Changes of Circumstance being processed in an average of 8 calendar days.

In terms of the claims checked that were ‘correct, first time’ (with even £0.01p ‘out’ being classified as an incorrect assessment), at the end of Quarter 3 2024/25:

- City of Lincoln: 94.39% *(1,481 out of 1, 519 checked)*,
- North Kesteven: 98.62% *(1,070 out of 1, 085 checked)*.

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

The table at paragraph 6.1 of the officer's report showed the invaluable support provided by the Welfare Team to the residents of Lincoln and North Kesteven in Quarter 3 2024/25.

Outcomes and demands had generally increased throughout the team, for both partner local authorities. There were a number of key reasons why the levels of Welfare/Money advice in Lincoln was higher than in North Kesteven, including:

- Differences in demographics;
- 'Customer journey' different at each Council;
- Significant number of foodbank vouchers issued at Lincoln compared to North Kesteven.

Members offered their thanks to all members of staff in recognition of performance achievements within the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service, particularly with added pressures.

55. Revenues and Benefits - Financial Monitoring Quarter 3 2024/25

Purpose of Report

To present to Members the third quarter's (ending 31 December 2024) performance for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service for 2024/25, as detailed at Appendix 1 to the report.

Decision

That the actual position at Quarter 3 as detailed within the officer's report be noted.

Alternation Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The forecast outturn for 2024/25 predicted there would be a saving against the approved budget of £32,380, which included the newly confirmed 2024/25 pay award, paid in November 2024.

The approved budget for 2024/25 was agreed by the Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee on 22 February 2024, which set a budget of £3,075,650 for the service.

At Quarter 1 the budget was increased to reflect New Burdens grants totalling £27,480, with no further changes at quarter two.

Further new burdens totalling £11,440 were received at Quarter 3,

Financial performance as at the third quarter of 2024/25 as detailed in Appendix 1 to this report resulted in an underspend against the approved budget of £16,890, including the nationally agreed pay award.

The main forecast year-end variations against the approved budget for 2024/25 were noted within the table at paragraph 4.3 of the officer's report.

56. Revenues and Benefits - Base Budget Forecast 2025/26

Purpose of Report

To present the Base Budget Forecast for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service for 2025/26.

Decision

That the Base Budget Forecast for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service for 2025/26 be approved.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service was formed on 1 June 2011, with a budget set to deliver savings for both partner authorities.

The Delegation and Joint Committee Agreement required the Base Budget Forecast for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service to be reported to members; this report met this requirement.

The Base Budget Forecast for 2025/26 was included at Appendix 1 to the report, including a full reconciliation to the previous Base Budget Forecast outlined in Appendix 2.

A full review of each line of the budget had taken place to ensure a fair representation of the activity of the service. This had led to budgets being transferred between different shared service functions. Although each Authority had a different percentage of each service, across the service as a whole this had not led to either Authority paying significantly more than the other.

As a result of inflationary pressures there had been an increase in the base budget from last year, in the main, due to increasing salary costs resulting from the higher than anticipated pay award in 2024/25, as agreed nationally, the pay award reflected the higher of either, a flat rate increase of £1,290, or 2.5% to all employees, equivalent to a 5.72% increase for the lowest paid members of staff and with the majority of officers receiving pay rises above 5% for the second consecutive year, in comparison to the original budgeted estimate of 3%.

Additionally, in the 2024 Autumn Budget, the Government announced a change to employer’s National Insurance contributions from April 2025, which would see rates increased by 1.2% from 13.8% to 15%, along with a reduction in the secondary threshold from £9,100 to £5,000. More employers would become eligible to pay National Insurance contributions.

Members queried the arithmetical accuracy of the figures quoted at Appendix 2 of the report. Officers agreed to double-check the figures and offer feedback outside of today’s meeting.

57. Business Rates Update

Purpose of Report

To provide the Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee with an update on current issues within non-domestic rates, related to City of Lincoln Council, North Kesteven District Council and West Lindsey District Council. The report was not intended to include non-domestic rate performance matters, as this was covered within the Performance Update reported to Joint Committee today.

Decision

That the content of the report be noted.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report included some of the changes announced as a result of the Government's financial support provided to businesses in the form of NDR relief, as well as forthcoming changes to the NDR system.

The following updates were noted:

Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief

Eligibility criteria for the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief was set out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and issued to Local Authorities on 20 December 2021. No changes were made to the qualifying criteria for the year 2024/25.

This relief had been extended for the year 2025/26 – with guidance provided by MHCLG ON 16 January 2025.It was expected to end on 31 March 2026, with the introduction of the RHL multipliers.

The table at paragraph 4.5 of the officer's report reflected the significant reduction in the amounts awarded in the last three years (previously known as the Expanded Retail Discount (ERD) scheme), with an estimate on the award to be granted in 2024/25.

NDR Changes and Significant Reliefs/Discounts

At the Autumn Statement on 30 October 2024, the Chancellor announced that the Government would continue to provide a package of NDR measures to support businesses in England.

- The retail, hospitality and leisure relief (RHL) would continue for 2025/26 at 40% up to £110,000 per business. Although this relief was to continue, the reduction from 75% to 40% would be significant for a lot of businesses.
- The multipliers were announced for 2025/26 – the small business multiplier would be frozen at 49.9p again. The standard multiplier would be uprated by the September 2024 CPI rate to 55.5p (2024/25 54.6p)
- Going forward from 2026/27 the Government intended to introduce two permanently lower multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure properties.

This would be paid for by a higher multiplier for properties with a rateable value (RV) of above £500,000. This meant that overall, there would be 5 different multipliers depending on the rateable value of the hereditament and the activities carried out at the hereditament. The details of these multipliers were not expected to be announced until the 2025 budget.

- Private schools were to lose their mandatory charity relief (80%) with effect from 1st April 2025, subject to Parliamentary process. Private schools which were 'wholly or mainly' concerned with providing full time education to pupils with an Education, Health and Care plan would remain eligible for the relief.

NB. We had been instructed by MHCLG not to remove the mandatory relief until the legislation had been completed

Multipliers from 2026

The most significant announcement for NDR in the budget was the announcement of alternative multipliers for qualifying properties from 1 April 2026.

The full details of this were not yet known as this would require changes to the legislation and more information was expected to be released as the legislation was developed.

Like most current reliefs, the RHL was currently delivered using discretionary powers found in Section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988. In order to provide more certainty, the Government wanted to make the RHL a permanent feature of the NDR system and to level up NDR between online retailers and the High Street – the changes to the multipliers may go some way to doing this. Once this became part of the way the liability was calculated, it would no longer be a 'discretionary relief' under Section 47.

The five multipliers for 2026 were expected to be–

- Standard multiplier
- Small business multiplier
- Standard multiplier RHL
- Small business multiplier RHL
- Premium multiplier.

Any property with a Rateable Value in excess of £500,000 would have their rates calculated based on the premium multiplier, although properties in the RHL sector were expected to be based on either the Standard RHL or the Small business RHL. All other properties would therefore be calculated on either the standard or the small business multiplier as they were now.

Significant changes would need to be made to the current software in order for officers to be able to override the standard and small business multiplier in favour of the RHL where the activities at the property met the RHL eligibility.

MHCLG would have to provide a methodology for compensating local government for the loss of income arising from this announcement. The amount raised from the premium charge was meant to cover the cost of the lost income from applying the RHL multipliers, however, it was unlikely to work at local level.

Transforming NDR – Information taken from CIPFA

This paper was published by the Treasury as part of the Budget papers. The Government wanted to “create a fairer NDR system that protects the high street, supports investment, and is fit for the 21st century”.

The first step was the introduction of lower multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure from 2026-27.

The paper invited business and other stakeholders to discuss how the government could deliver a transformed system.

The impact on the local government funding system would be considered in the review of NDR which the paper acknowledged was an important source of revenue for local government. The Government wanted to ensure that local government funding was not affected by these tax reforms.

The temporary RHL reliefs had meant uncertainty for businesses. The Government were looking to bring in more certainty by introducing a permanent reduction for retail properties with the introduction of the additional multipliers.

Other areas of reform included looking at the effectiveness of Improvement Relief, the loss of small business relief when taking on a second property, cliff edges in the system and empty property relief.

The Government would consider avoidance and evasion. There would be consultation on a ‘General Anti Avoidance Rule’. The Government would also look at the benefits and potential costs of shortening the gap between the Antecedent Valuation Date, the revaluation coming into effect, and increasing the frequency of valuations.

Views were invited especially from businesses and business representative organisations, local authorities and rating agents on the various reforms to fit with its overall objectives between November 2024 and March 2025, our shared service officers had expressed an interest in being part of this engagement.

58. Cost of Living Support

Purpose of Report

To provide Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee with an update regarding various areas relating to the national welfare reform agenda, as well as current cost of living initiatives to support residents.

Decision

That the content of the report be noted, and a further update be presented at the next meeting of this Committee.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The report provided Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee with an update with regard to the national and local position of welfare reform/other initiatives, with a specific focus on Universal Credit, Discretionary Housing Payments, Household Support Fund, and Financial Inclusion matters.

The national Welfare Reform agenda had impacted significantly 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 had continued as further changes had been introduced, such as the ongoing rollout of Universal Credit. These changes had 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.

The Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living related matters had caused significant challenges to households locally and nationally. The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service played a lead and key role in developing deliverable schemes to help mitigate some of the impacts of cost-of-living challenges. Some of these schemes were directly delivered by this Service, some in partnership with other teams within the Councils, also with organisations such as those in the voluntary sector.

Universal Credit (UC)

The latest national figures published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were released on 21 January 2025, with statistics relevant to the period up to December 2024:

- 7,276,191 households receiving UC (an increase from 7,078,771 as reported at the last meeting of this Committee).

Local authority statistics:

- City of Lincoln – 13,438 (13,142 as at the last report).
- North Kesteven – 8,619 (8,475 as at the last report).

On 25 April 2022, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made a statement in the House of Lords (Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament) regarding managed UC migration for working-age legacy benefits – with the aim of completing this migration by the end of 2024. A 'Discovery Phase' of migration had been taking place, with a number of areas around the country (not Lincolnshire) with a relatively small number of UC cases.

DWP released information to state those in receipt of Tax Credits would be asked to apply for UC by the end of 2024 (Tax credits are ending - Understanding Universal Credit). DWP also announced, through the Autumn Statement 2022, that the managed migration of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) cases had been delayed to 2028/29. A further announcement was made on 19 April 2024 with plans to bring forward the managed migration of ESA cases. Notifications for this group commenced in September 2024.

DWP issued a letter to local authorities on 12 November 2024, which stated the aim of issuing the last UC migration notices in early December 2025, so that all in scope customers could be moved to UC and close legacy benefits (where appropriate) by the end of March 2026.

There had been numerous changes to the UC rollout/ migration timeline over the last decade, and the latest stated aimed timeline could be subject to change.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

On 13 March 2024, DWP announced DHP government grants for 2024/25. For City of Lincoln and North Kesteven, these were exactly the same amounts as for 2023/24 at £132,330 for City of Lincoln and £86,931 for North Kesteven respectively. On 19 December 2024, the DWP announced DHP government grants for 2025/26, again these rates as expected were frozen for the forthcoming financial year. The table at paragraph 5.1 of the report included the confirmed 2024/25 and 2025/26 allocations, also showing previous years' grants.

The table at paragraph 5.2 of the report broke down the number of DHP applications received and determined in Quarter 3 2024/25 and DHP spend for quarter 3 was shown at paragraph 5.3.

Household Support Fund

The report gave an update on the current position in relation to Household Support Fund wave 6 ('HSF6')

On 2 September 2024, the Government announced an extension to the Household Support scheme. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) stated there would be an extension to the Household Support Fund, for the next six months – i.e. 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025.

Lincolnshire County Council received an allocation of HSF6 from DWP for Lincolnshire.

Indicative allocations of HSF6 were subsequently notified by Lincolnshire County, and had been accepted by our shared service local authorities, as below:

- City of Lincoln Council: £296,862
- North Kesteven District Council: £204,093.

Officers had been proactive in preparing for delivery of the HSF6 schemes in our districts. Government guidance was awaited on a further HSF7 scheme to be introduced in due course.

Winter Fuel Payments and Pension Credit

On 29 July 2024, the Chancellor announced that Winter Fuel Payments would become means-tested from 2024/25. Eligibility information had subsequently been made available on GOV.UK (Winter Fuel Payment: Eligibility - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk))

Lincolnshire Financial Inclusion Partnership (see Section 9 of this report) had already planned a countywide Pension Credit take-up campaign in Autumn 2024, - this announcement had brought forward this activity, and communications and take-up activities were now taking place to encourage and assist residents in claiming Pension Credit as soon possible. A national Pension Credit Week of Action also took place in week-commencing 9 September 2024 ("You could get Pension Credit" – Week of Action to drive take up - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)).

In the Chancellor's statement on 29 July 2024, the potential of Housing Benefit and Pension Credit being 'merged' was mentioned. Any merger (whether this be into Housing Benefit, or into Pension Credit), would be likely to take several years. Officers were working as part of a small working group with national DWP as to what this closer working might mean and how it could best be delivered.

Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion continued to be a key objective and factor in many areas of LiNK's work. The Lincolnshire Financial Inclusion Partnership (LFIP) was currently chaired by the Assistant Director Shared Revenues and Benefits for North Kesteven District Council and City of Lincoln Council, - which brought together organisations and partners to promote and raise the profile of financial inclusion across the county.

Three key areas of high-profile engagement by LFIP in 2024/25, were:

- A co-ordinated countywide approach to Pension Credit take-up activity;

- Co-ordination of 'Talk Money Week' activities in Lincolnshire during November 2024: Talk Money Week (moneyhelper.org.uk) ;

- A conference to be held on 27 February 2025, at The Storehouse in Skegness (HOME | The Storehouse), to follow-up from the highly successful conferences held at the Jakemans Community Stadium in Boston in February 2023, and Jubilee Church Life Centre in Grantham in February 2024.

Representatives of LFIP also presented a well-received session at the Lincolnshire Suicide Prevention Conference held at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln, on 4 September 2024, in respect of the links between Money and Mental Wellbeing.

In terms of the well-documented ongoing national cost of living pressures, both our partner Councils continued to review and update web pages dedicated to initiatives to try and assist our residents with cost of living support:

- Cost of Living Support – City of Lincoln Council

- Cost of Living Support | North Kesteven District Council (n-kesteven.gov.uk) .

City of Lincoln Council approved funding for some cost of living projects through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, for 2024/25, and this work continued to deliver effective initiatives working with a range of partners.

Autumn Budget 2024

A number of announcements as part of the Chancellor's Autumn Budget on 30 October 2024 impacted on benefits and cost of living support, with highlights being:

- *The settlement provides £1 billion in 2025-26 to extend the Household Support Fund in England and Discretionary Housing Payments in England and Wales.*

Local authorities will use this funding to support households facing the greatest hardship.

- *The government is also helping low-income households on Universal Credit (UC) by creating a new Fair Repayment Rate. This will cap UC repayments at 15% of the standard allowance, benefiting 1.2 million households by allowing them to keep more of their UC award each month.*
- *The settlement also allocates additional funding to increase the take up of Pension Credit and support work to allow the administration of Pension Credit and Housing Benefit to be brought together for new claimants from 2026.*

Following the Autumn Budget, The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions confirmed in a written statement to Parliament:

- *I have concluded my statutory annual review of state pension and benefit rates under the Social Security Administration Act 1992. The new rates will apply in the tax year 2025/26 and will mainly come into effect from 7 April 2025.*

- *I am pleased to announce that the basic and new state pensions, and the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit, will be increased by 4.1%, in line with the increase in average weekly earnings in the year to May-July 2024. Other state pension and benefit rates covered by my statutory review will be increased by 1.7%, in line with the increase in the consumer prices index in the year to September 2024.This includes universal credit and other benefits and statutory payments linked to participation in the labour market; and additional state pension and pension credit elements other than the standard minimum guarantee.*

- *Although not covered by my statutory review of state pension and benefit rates, I can also inform the House that local housing allowance rates for 2025/26 will be maintained at the 2024/25 levels, following their increase in April 2024; and that the benefit cap has not been reviewed for 2025/26 and will also be maintained at the 2024/25 levels.*

Officers would continue to keep abreast of the detail relating to these announcements, proactively responding as appropriate.

Members thanked the whole Shared Revenues and Benefits Team for all their hard work in supporting vulnerable members of the public. The vital importance of partnership working both now and into the future was emphasised.

59. Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan 2025/26

Purpose of Report

As set out in the Shared Revenues and Benefits Business Case Delegation and Joint Committee Agreement, an annual Business Plan was presented to this committee each year for consideration and approval.

Decision

1. That the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan 2025/26 be approved.

2. That a report on those customers registered on the self-service platform at the end of the financial year be presented to the next meeting of Committee on 19 May 2025.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

Reason for Decision

The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for the financial year 2025/26 was attached at Appendix 1 to the report. It featured the following:

- Key Achievements in 2024/25;
- Savings in 2024/25;
- Key Activities for 2025/26;
- Strategic Priority Schemes 2025/26;
- Towards Financial Sustainability projects 2025/26;
- Key Risks;
- Performance Management;
- Safeguarding;
- Equality Actions;
- Working in Neighbourhoods;
- Workforce Development;
- Social Value;
- Data Protection and Information Governance;
- Corporate Social Responsibility.

It was reported that the year 2024/25 had been another positive year for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service, albeit very challenging with a whole host of post Covid-19 pandemic and Cost of living support related-initiatives, pressures and demands. The ongoing impacts from Covid-19 had been significant and could not be underestimated, as were the ongoing impacts of rising cost of living challenges. The financial impacts on taxpayers and businesses had been substantial, which had understandably continued to impact on revenues collection – particularly in relation to Council Tax. The service continued to promote the ‘Get in touch, not in debt’ message – with a real focus on ‘welfare’ and income-maximisation for customers when making payment arrangements. The increase in the overall Benefits workload as cost of living challenges continued to significantly impact, meant that staffing resources and priorities needed to be regularly ‘juggled’ to meet these demands promptly and effectively. There continued to be increased contact from taxpayers and businesses struggling to pay their bills, as well as high levels of benefit claims and cost of living support.

A number of additional demands had been placed on our Revenues and Benefits Service over the last twelve months, including;

- Household Support Fund (wave 6);
- Cost of Living Support;
- Business Rates Reliefs;
- High Volumes in Benefit Claims/Changes/Universal Credit Changes;
- Alternative Energy Support Funds;
- Storm Babet Flood Support;
- Pressures and Impacts from Temporary Accommodation, and ‘Frozen’ levels of Discretionary Housing Payments funding.

These additional demands should not be underestimated and understandably impacted on levels of performance in some areas. However, despite these major challenges, performance in most areas remained positive – officers were wholly committed to achieving the best possible standards of service to our customers.

The plan for 2025/26 continued to look at a range of key initiatives relating to areas including e-services, cost of living, as well as standards of performance. Members requested further information on those customers registered for e-services.

60. Exclusion of the Press and Public

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

61. Revenues and Benefits Staffing Structure - Proposed Changes

Purpose of Report

To request a change to the Revenues and Benefits Staffing Structure.

Decision

That the recommendation to the Shared Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee, as set out in the exempt report, be approved, subject to the Management of Change procedure being satisfactorily completed.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

As detailed in the exempt report to the Executive.

Reasons for the Decision

As detailed in the exempt report to the Executive.