

SUBJECT: REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED SERVICE BUSINESS PLAN 2025/26

DIRECTORATE: CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND TOWN CLERK

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

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

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report sets out the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for 2025/26.

3. Business Plan

- 3.1 The Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Business Plan for the financial year 2025/26 is included as Appendix 1 to this report.

- 3.2 Key features of the plan, are:

- 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.

4. Summary of Plan

- 4.1 The year 2024/25 has been another positive year for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service, albeit very challenging with a whole host of ongoing post Covid-19 pandemic and Cost of living support related-initiatives, pressures and demands. The ongoing impacts from Covid-19 have been significant and cannot be underestimated, as are the ongoing impacts of rising cost of living challenges. The financial impacts on taxpayers and businesses have been substantial, which

has understandably continued to impact on revenues collection – particularly in relation to Council Tax. The service continues to promote the ‘Get in touch, not in debt’ message – with a real focus on ‘welfare,’ income-maximisation and mitigating undue financial hardship for customers when making payment arrangements. The increase in the overall Benefits workload as cost of living challenges continue to significantly impact, means that staffing resources and priorities need to be regularly ‘juggled’ to meet these demands promptly and effectively.

- 4.2 Further to the above, there continues 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 have 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 Benefits claims/changes / Universal Credit changes;
- Pressures and impacts from temporary accommodation, and ‘frozen’ levels of Discretionary Housing Payments funding.

These additional demands should not be underestimated and understandably impact on levels of performance in some areas.

However, despite these major challenges, performance in most areas remains positive – officers remain wholly committed to achieving the best possible standards of service to our customers.

- 4.3 To give an indication of key outcomes, above the ‘standard’ Key Performance Measures reported, the following figures demonstrate examples of what the shared service is delivering in 2024/25:

- ✓ **Household Support Fund Payments totalling almost 930,000;**
- ✓ **Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief (for businesses) of over £8 million;**
- ✓ **Discretionary Housing Payments of almost £220,000;**
- ✓ **UK Shared Prosperity Funding (City of Lincoln) cost of living initiatives, over £75,000.**

- 4.4 The shared service continues to operate under a ‘hybrid working model,’ with the ‘standard’ in the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service being 40% office/ 60% homeworking. This approach is meeting front-facing customer demands, service demands, whilst gaining advantages of homeworking through efficiencies and increased productivity in some areas. A ‘one team’ and customer-focussed culture has also been maintained, as colleagues do get to see each other in person again through office presence and meetings – as well as through regular communication via Microsoft Teams. The Revenues and Benefits Management Team (RBMT)

continually review and implement changes to further improve the 'one team' culture, - face-to-face team briefings are taking place in Sleaford and Lincoln at the end of April 2025.

- 4.5 Ongoing budget pressures including combined reductions in funding through Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) means that the service continues to adapt the shared service budget, accordingly, allocating resources to areas of higher customer demand, operating vacancy management extremely carefully, and 'flexing' job roles to take on additional initiatives.
- 4.6 The plan for 2025/26 continues to look at a range of key initiatives relating to areas including e-services, cost of living, as well as standards of performance.
- 4.7 The shared service will continue to focus on seeking partnership working opportunities and new areas of work which fit within the service's wider remit, as well as successfully maintaining current arrangements and taking on appropriate new shared projects where these opportunities arise. Our service works with a fantastic set of partner organisations (particularly in the voluntary sector) to deliver a range of seamless, holistic solutions to help people struggling – particularly financially.
- 4.8 It continues to be extremely challenging times for local government in general, not least of which being in respect of Revenues and Benefits – due to the nature of the service whereby each household and business in the districts is impacted in some way by the services we provide – and a range of new areas of work demands being placed on the service (examples highlighted in paragraph 4.2). The profile of this service has certainly been further elevated in recent years, for example in relation to cost of living support and linking into anti-poverty strategy.
- 4.9 Our shared service is anything but a 'transactional service,' but a key strategic and customer-focussed service that has tangible and real impacts on people's lives – with continuing cost of living pressures, this is more vital than ever. Our service aims to achieve positive impacts for residents and businesses of Lincoln, North Kesteven and West Lindsey wherever possible, aiming to help people become financially and digitally included and helping those who can do find employment. Cost of living has also focused on key 'basic' requirements of life for residents – i.e. food, fuel and clothing – as well as helping residents move from emergency provision to longer-term sustainable solutions – for example, use of community groceries. Our shared service is extremely well placed to tackle the challenges, and positive opportunities, ahead.

5. Strategic Priorities

- 5.1 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."
- 5.2 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 and Partnership Working are all key priorities for the shared service.

6. Organisational Impacts

6.1 Finance:

The delivery of the Annual Business Plan will be accommodated within the base budget for the Shared Service, further details of which appears in the Base Budget Report elsewhere on this agenda.

6.2 Legal Implications including Procurement Rules

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

6.3 Equality, Diversity & Human Rights

There are no direct implications arising from this report.

7. Risk Implications

7.1 A Risk Register is in place for the Revenues and Benefits shared service, and is included at Appendix 2 to this report.

8. Recommendation

8.1 The Joint Committee is recommended to:

- 1) Comment on the Annual Business Plan for the shared service, and
- 2) Approve the 2025/26 Business Plan.

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 – Business Plan 2025/26
Appendix 2 – Risk Register

List of Background Papers:

None

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