

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

JOINT EXECUTIVE REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED SERVICE COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 5 July 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Geoffrey Williamson (Chair), Mrs Joan Lloyd, Lloyd Briscoe and Jeannette Thomas.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6:00 pm
End Time: 7:15 pm

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

It was moved by Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd and seconded by Councillor Jeannette Thomas that Councillor Geoffrey Williamson be appointed Chair for the meeting. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Boylan and Jan Goodeve.

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES - JOINT REVS AND BENS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - 1 JULY 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Joint Executive Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Committee meeting held on 1 July 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 ANNUAL UPDATE

The Committee received a report in relation to the performance of the Shared Service for the year 2021/22. The report outlined the challenges during the Covid19 pandemic and the budget outturn position for 2021/22.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service updated Members on the following key issues:

- Test and Trace programme was successful and helped certain groups of people who contracted Covid19 and had to isolate, which resulted in loss of

their earnings. The scheme was difficult to administrator due to several factors including the customer's expectation of entitlement.

- The average processing times for Housing Benefits for new claims and changes in circumstances were 7.25 days for Stevenage and 7.15 days for East Herts. On average this was 2.4 days longer than 2020/21. A number of staff were involved in the Test and Trace programme which resulted in longer wait period for Housing Benefits applicants.
- Members were advised that for the fifth year running the closing value of outstanding debts was reducing with 13.6% of Stevenage and 24.5% of East Herts were live claims.
- The Discretionary Housing Payment grants funds received from the government had reduced since last year from £140m to £100m, however the demand from struggling families were not plummeting. Therefore, it created pressure and challenges for customers and officers alike.
- The Housing Benefits caseload was reducing on a monthly basis predominantly because cases were transitioning to Universal Credit. The Housing Benefits caseload demonstrated an 11% reduction for 2021/22 for each Council.
- The overall Council Tax Support caseload increased during 2020/21, as result of the Covid19 pandemic, but for 2021/22 the caseload for Stevenage reduced by 7.4%, and 8.7% for East Herts. Members were advised that both councils committed to raise awareness on Council Tax Support, as some people thought the Council Tax Support was included in their Universal Credit claim.
- Verifications of Earnings and Pensions service supported by the Government's anti-fraud agenda helped to get the information regarding customer's change of circumstances quicker, which required to amend the customer's claim.
- The Government was shifting more people into Universal Credit. Customers experiencing a change in circumstances would also be transferred from Housing Benefits to Universal Credit.
- The Council Tax service had supported the Business rates grants schemes since March 2020, and its core performance was impacted in this area. The Service was further impacted by the Government's Energy Rebate Scheme delivered by the Service. It had to divert significant resources to manage the project.
- Members were advised that considerable work went on to collect prior year arrears. Overall, the level of 2021/22 debt was reduced. The Service supported customers through the Covid19 pandemic by offering rescheduling payments, increased in flexibility and deferring arrangements.
- Stevenage retained the premium for empty properties at 50%, and whilst East Herts increased to 100% for properties empty more than two years. Stevenage charged the premium on 89 properties and East Herts on 130.
- The Service carried out an empty homes and single person discount review during the Covid19 pandemic to ensure records were up to date.
- The Service was under significant pressure during the Covid19 pandemic for distributing the grants to eligible businesses. The government initially announced the Covid19 response in 2020/21 and continued with new iterations throughout 2021/22. Members were advised that the grant schemes

during the pandemic were complex and resource intensive which had put a huge pressure on the Service. This also impacted the ability of the Service to carry its own core functions and achievement of collection rates.

- Members were informed that majority of the business grant schemes had been completed, but it would take a period for the usual workflow to pre-pandemic level.
- The Service had continued to work offering digital solutions for customers engaging with the Service, which provided opportunities 24/7 service delivery and efficiencies. Stevenage and East Herts customers could self-serve a range of services for Housing Benefits, Council Tax and Business Rates.
- Members were advised on the internal audits result, which was rated Good for both councils for all three categories of Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefits.
- The Service saw a jump in resignations and early retirement and struggled to recruit. Members were informed that it was challenging for the Service to recruit as the availability of replacement staff or even agency cover was extremely difficult.
- Members were advised that Service was working on expanding the business case. The Service was approached by two other local authorities to join the Shared Service. Dialogues had taken place, and when completed would be brought to Members for consideration.
- Members were advised that the Service had an underspend budget of £11,568, and the figures could had been bigger but for the increases in corporate IT costs.

Members praised the staff hard work during the pandemic for processing complex government grants. Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd proposed, and Councillor Williamson seconded a motion that a formal Member acknowledgment of the efforts of the Revenue and Benefits Shared Service to be passed on to officers for their work during the Covid19 pandemic.

It was **RESOLVED** that the annual update report of the Shared Revenue and Benefits Service be noted.

5 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR