

Present: Councillor Stephen Woodliffe (Chairman), Councillor Anton Dani (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Tom Ashton, David Brown, Paul Goodale, Yvonne Stevens, Peter Watson and Judy Welbourn

In attendance:

Officers –
Assistant Director - Assets, Head of Revenues and Benefits and Community Safety Manager

15 MINUTES

The Committee made amendments to the Minutes for the 17 July meeting.

16 APOLOGIES

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors; Alison Austin, Alan Bell, Frank Pickett and Judith Skinner.

17 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None

18 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None

19 HOUSING BENEFITS UPDATE

The report provided the Committee with an update on the Benefits department workload and performance, additional government schemes, and housing Benefit overpayments.

The Head of Revenue and Benefits PSPS, when presenting the report outlined the following things;

- Boston Borough Council had seen an 11% increase in incoming workload between April – July 2022 compared to the same time period in 2021.
- Universal Credit records had increased automation to around 55% over the past 18 months.
- The Department for Work and Pensions publish performance for Local authorities in relation to Housing Benefit. The statistics for 2021/22 show Boston Borough Council as 22 days for new claims, and 9 days for changes. However, due to increase in workload and resource levels, the cumulative performance to the end August 2022 was 31 days for new claims and 9 days for changes, Council Tax Support was 31 days for new claims and 18 days for changes.
- As at 12 September, there was 871 items of outstanding work for BBC. 81% of that was less than 4 weeks old, and 59% was less than 2 weeks old. An ongoing improving position.

- The Test and Trace Support Payment scheme ended on 30 April 2022. 1,909 applications were made, resulting in 878 payments of £500 to support residents on low incomes and benefits who were required to self-isolate.
- In the announcement of the £150 Energy Rebate Scheme in February 2022. 25,308 Boston residents have received their payments totalling £3,796,200.
- Boston had an allocation of £119,250 from a national £144m discretionary fund, the department would be distributing the funding to eligible recipients by the end of November 2022.
- The Housing Benefit Overpayment at end of June 2022, was £2.4m, an average level of debt for each live Housing benefit claim of £945. This is an area for further analysis and focus for improvement. Overpayments cannot be avoided.

The Committee thanked the Revenue and Benefits department for their hard work in recent years.

Members were concerned regarding the Housing Benefit Overpayments, both how it has happened and what it means now means for the residents who cannot afford to pay it back. In response the Head of Revenue and Benefits PSPS explained that it is not something that can be avoided. It will have happened over a period of years and can be caused by; claimant error, fraud or LA error. Also, that each case is handled differently when it comes to overpayments, some are resolved by reduction in ongoing benefits, others have a payment plan set up.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the report.

20 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2023/24

The Head of Revenues and Benefits PSPS presented a report which updated Members on the Local Council Tax Support Scheme to date, along with the proposals for 2023/24 ahead of final scheme recommendations and approval. The Council Tax Support Scheme was first introduced in April 2013 and was reviewed annually. The scheme for the current year was approved by Council in January 2022. Members were also asked to consider whether the department should undertake a fundamental review.

It was highlighted to the Committee that during the 2022/23 scheme as at the 31st May 2023 the annual expenditure was indicated to be around £3.7million, the Council was currently supporting over 4000 claimants of which 2104 were working age.

The Local Government Finance Act required that before a scheme can be adopted by the billing authority, it must;

- Consult any major precepting authority which has power to issue a precept to it,
- Publish a draft scheme in such manner as it thinks fit, and
- Consult such other persons as it considers are likely to have an interest in the operation of the scheme.

Members' views were to retain the current scheme for the next financial year and increase it in line with the Department of Work and Pension.

Members were in agreement that a fundamental review should take place with the view of improving the service, making it easier for claimants and saving money for the Council.

RESOLVED:

- 1. The Committee support the retention of the current scheme for the next financial year.**

The Committee agree that the Council should increase the scheme in line with DWP provisions for 23/24.

21 SOUTH AND EAST LINCOLNSHIRE COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGY

The Community Safety Manager presented a report which set out the duties placed on local authorities and other named statutory agencies in relation to crime and disorder (Section 5-7 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998). It outlined the current Community Safety Partnership (CPS) arrangements across the South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership, and in Lincolnshire as a whole.

A Community Safety Strategy had been produced to demonstrate the work of the South and East Lincolnshire Partnership which was working collaboratively with the County Safer Lincolnshire Partnership, as they sought to address crime and disorder at a local, sub-regional and County level.

Following Members questions the Community Safety Manager confirmed the following;

- All new cameras that are being installed would have improved sensors for better performance in low light conditions. Infrared lighting on the cameras can be activated where other lighting was unavailable.
- Around 144 cameras would be installed in 36 locations in Boston.
- The additional cameras would introduce a Safe Zone which would offer blanket CCTV coverage on a certain route throughout the Town.
- The Safe Zone would be promoted by hard signs, websites, in taxis and leaflets.

Members were in support of the report, especially the Safe Zone initiative.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note and support the contents of the report and the work of the partners in addressing crime and disorder in South and East Lincolnshire and Lincolnshire as a whole.

22 WORK PROGRAMME

Members agreed to join a BTAC meeting on 15th December, Inspector Clarkson and Superintendent Coates from Lincolnshire Police will be present to discuss the Annual ASB and CCTV with the Community Safety Team.