Northumberland
County Council

Revenues and Benefits

Service Statement

April 2019

Service Director: Neil Bradley
Head of Service: Graeme Barnes
Lead Member: Cllr Nick Oliver

Revenues and Benefits Service

Service purpose and functions

Purpose:

The Revenues Service collects council tax and business rates income in an effective, efficient and timely manner to fund council services. In addition, the collection of sundry debt ensures that council services provided are paid for efficiently.

The Benefits Service administers Housing Benefit in line with Central Government legislation and Council Tax Support in line with the Council Tax Support Scheme approved by Members for 2019/20. In addition, the service also administers Blue Badges, Concessionary Travel, Free School Meals and the Council's Local Welfare Provision Scheme under the branding of NETS (Northumberland Emergency Transition Support).

The Corporate Fraud Team prevents, detects, investigates and reports any irregularities and fraud in order to ensure that public money is spent appropriately.

Primary functions:

The primary function of services provided by the Revenues and Benefits Service is summarised below:

1. The billing, collection and enforcement of Council Tax;

2. The billing, collection and enforcement of Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates);

3. The assessment of entitlement to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support;

4. Payments of Housing Benefit and collection of overpayments;

5. The assessment of entitlement to Blue Badges;

6. The assessment to entitlement of Free School Meals;

7. The assessment to entitlement to Concessionary Travel;

8. The assessment of entitlement to NETS (Northumberland Emergency Transition Support Scheme);

9. The prevention and detection of corporate fraud;

10. The collection of sundry debt income on behalf of the County Council;

Service Parameters

Key service facts and figures

1. The billing and collection of £203.3 million in Council Tax for 154 thousand domestic properties in Northumberland;

2. The billing and collection of £85.2 million in non-domestic rates billing for 13.5 thousand business premises in Northumberland;

3. The assessment of entitlement to housing benefit and council tax support benefit and its payment for 26.3 thousand claimants;

4. The assessment and administration of 17,000 Blue Badges;

5. The assessment of entitlement to 6,500 Free School Meals;

6. The assessment to entitlement to Concessionary Travel;

7. The prevention, detection, investigation and reporting of corporate fraud;

8. The processing 125 thousand housing benefit payments per year;

9. The control £76.5 million sundry debt on behalf of the County Council;

10. The assessment of entitlement of 4,000 applications to the NETS scheme;

Summary of service resources at 1 April 2019:

Function	Number of FTE posts	Staffing expenditure	Non-staffing expenditure	Income	Capital investment
Revenues & Benefits Manager	20.4	638,750	45,370	0	0
Benefits	50.18	1,714,490	79,519,420	(80,269,230)	0
Revenues	54.29	1,808,680	557,130	(1,818,210)	0
Totals for Service	124.87	4,161,920	80,122,920	(82,087,440)	0

Contribution to the Corporate Plan

The Revenues and Benefits Service aims to provide the best possible service for the residents and businesses of the County in an efficient and effective way. The service will ensure this is done in line with the Vision and Values set out in the Corporate Plan by ensuring the service is customer focussed, supports innovation and change and where possible involves all in decisions that affect the service.

The Revenues Service contributes to the Corporate Plan 2018-21 by ensuring that income is collected as efficiently and effectively as possible to enable the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan to be funded.

The Benefits Service contributes to the Corporate Plan 2018-21by ensuring that entitlement to housing benefit and council tax support are assessed efficiently and effectively to ensure that residents can meet their council tax and rent liabilities. The service also ensures that where there is entitlement to free school meal, Blue Badges and concessionary travel.

The Revenues Service's specific contribution is in meeting the 'we want to be efficient, open and work for everyone' theme by ensuring that as part of the Council's financial prudence commitment, income collection is effective, efficient and timely.

The Benefits Service's specific contribution is on meeting the 'we want you to feel safe, healthy and cared for' commitment by ensuring that residents are able to meet accurate rent and council tax commitments and to secure tenancies by accurate and timely housing benefit payments. In addition, the service also carries out other assessment for Blue Badge, Free School Meals and Concessionary Travel to ensure those entitled to assistance receive it.

The Corporate Fraud Team contribute to the 'we want to be efficient, open and work for everyone' of the Corporate Plan by ensuring the Council to fulfil its obligation to protect the public purse.

External Validation

Inspections

The Benefits Service is subject to intensive annual audits and the Housing Benefit Subsidy claim is subject to External Audit sign off by Ernst and Young via the Department for Work and Pensions. No significant qualification has ever been made to the claim.

During 2018-2019, 2 internal audits were also carried out for the Revenue and Benefits service. The final audit reports were issued with assurance levels as follows

Audit	Assurance
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support Audit	Full
Council Tax	Significant

Customer Perception

The following table shows the numbers of complaints received, Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) complaints received, and compliments received by the Revenues and Benefits Service in both 2017/18 and 2018/19:

	Informal Resolution	Stage 1 Opened	Stage 2 Opened	LGO	Compliments
2017/2018	51	22	7	2	17
2018/2019	33	30	5	0	17

The above information shows that in 2018/19 there were 12 fewer complaints received overall with none from the LGO and the number of compliments remained the same.
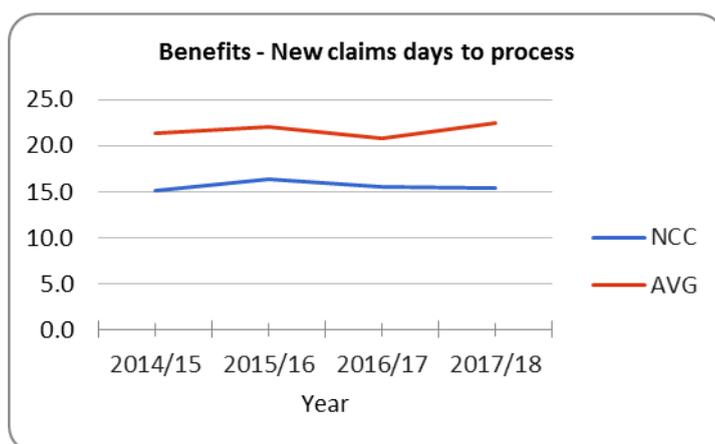
The service will seek advice from the Communications Team to look at the options available to seek other meaningful feedback on service delivery.
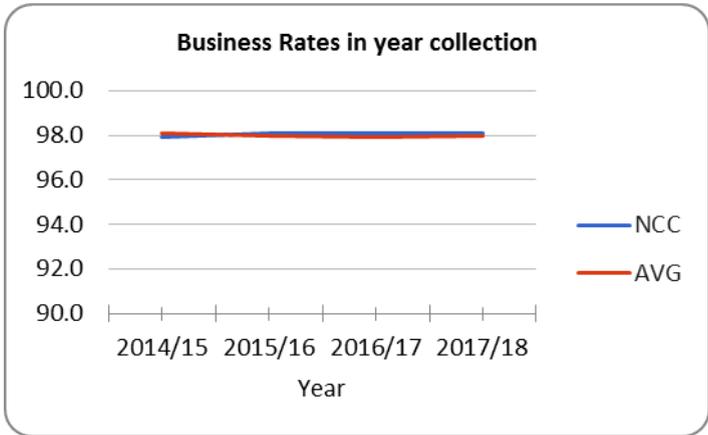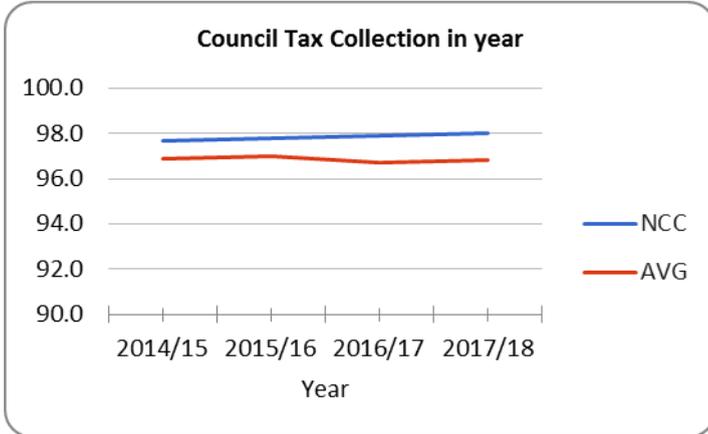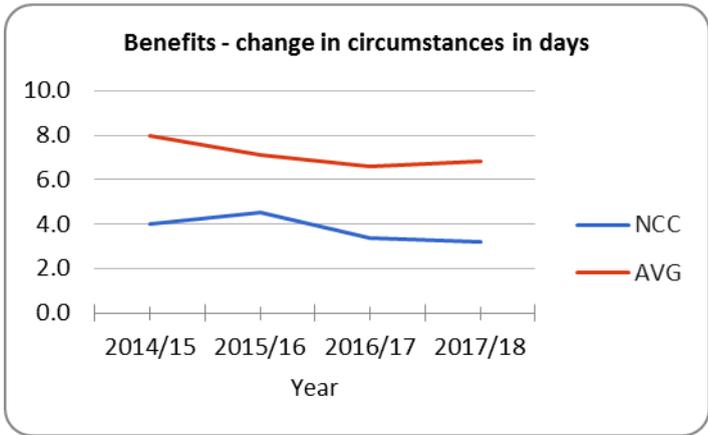
Benchmarking

The Revenues and Benefits Service take part in annual CIPFA Benchmarking Clubs covering:

- Council Tax
- Business Rates
- Sundry Debt
- Benefits

The key performance by the service against the benchmark average is as follows:

Benefits - change in circumstances in days

Council Tax Collection in year

Business Rates in year collection

Priorities for 2019 - 2021

Priority area	Key milestones
1. Implement the 'My Account' Customer Portal as a replacement for the Gandlake Portal in conjunction with development from IT by April 2019	● Identify Resource ● Project Plan ● Develop solution ● Test solution ● Soft Launch ● Go Live

2.	Implement Govtech online moves and changes of circumstance for council tax self-service by May 2019	• Set up software • Test software/identify issues • 'Smoke test' pre go live • Go live
3.	Develop Total Mobile solution for Visiting Officers by December 2019	• Identify where solution can be utilised • Work with IT • Develop solution • Test solution • Implement
4.	Complete a Desktop Refresh of IT kit in the service by July 2019	• Identify asset numbers of IT kit • Assess all software required for all kit • Plan the roll out • Confirm details with IT • Start roll out • Complete roll out
5.	The Business Rates Team will partake in the Microsoft 365 Pilot exercise to ensure that the services operational requirements are catered for by October 2019	• Attend pilot events • Desktop refresh • Implement 365 • Report issue identified to IT
6.	Implement Northgate Citizen Access Benefits for online applications and change of circumstances and consider feasibility of adding to the 'My Account' portal by September 2019	• Set up software in conjunction with IT • Test software and online application • Consider feasibility of adding to 'My Account 'portal • Soft launch • Go live
7.	Finalise the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2020/21 and if there are any changes carry out statutory consultation by January 2020	• Decision obtained on CTS scheme for 2020/21 • Set up consultation process if required • Carry out consultation if required • Draft report and follow committee cycle to get scheme for 2020/21 approved
8.	Ensure performance levels remain at or exceed targets for 2019/20 for the services key performance	• Monitor monthly performance

	indicators shown below	● Identify reasons for performance deterioration ● Take remedial action where required to address performance issue
9.	Evaluate whether penalties should be issued for council tax where information is not returned or found to be incorrect by December 2019	● Contact other Council's to assess effectiveness ● Identify areas this can be implemented ● Test process ● Brief Members/Executive Directors ● Implement
10.	Complete Staff Survey Action Plan by July 2019	● Review results of survey ● Identify themes ● Identify actions ● Present to staff ● Implement actions ● Monitor
11.	Carry out and review of the single person discount caseload by March 2020	● Data match ● Identify discrepancies utilising 3rd party software ● Issue review forms on a rolling basis ● Remove incorrect discounts
12.	Implement SMS Texting as a proactive measure for council tax recovery by August 2019	● Set up software ● Purchase text bundle ● Cleanse mobile phone data held ● Test the process ● Go live
13.	Set up online Landlord Portal for Benefits by September 2019 and consider feasibility of adding to the 'My Account' portal	● Purchase software ● Test software ● Set up live system ● Consider feasibility of adding to 'My Account' portal ● Soft launch ● Go live
14.	Continue to work towards Department for Work and Pensions VEP scheme targets by March 2020	● Monitor alerts ● Process VEP alerts ● Maximise number of alerts processed

15.	Carry out a take up campaign for Free School Meals by July 2019	● Data match between Benefits and Free School Meals system ● Identify unclaimed entitlement ● Mail drop ● Award
16.	Carry out Blue Badge assessment in line with new requirements and system provided via Department for Transport and implement an online application form by March 2020	● Set up new assessment processes ● Set up new payment process ● Implement text alerts ● Reduce the number of paper applications
17.	Implement an online application form for Concessionary Travel and consider the feasibility of linking to the 'My Account' portal	● Test online form ● Test process ● Consider feasibility of linking to the 'My Account' portal ● Go live
18.	Expand the verification process for Right to But applications for Registered Social Landlords (RSL) by March 2020	● Engage with RSLs ● Demonstrate process ● Negotiate fees for service ● Set up and implement process ● Monitor results ● Report to Audit Committee
19.	Develop new internal Counter Fraud Data Hub by March 2020	● Install Data Hub software ● Engage with internal departments ● Obtain data extracts ● Run periodic data matches ● Investigate errors/fraud ● Monitor results ● Report to Audit Committee
20.	Work with the Communications Team regarding carrying out a customer satisfaction survey during 2019/20	● Set out objectives of the survey ● Consider appropriate methods of engagement ● Issue survey ● Collate Results ● Produce action plan ● Implement action plan

Performance Framework

Measure	Outturn 2017-18	Outturn 2018-19	Target 2019-20	Target 2020-21
1. Percentage of Council Tax collected in-year	98.0	98.1	97.8	97.8
2. Percentage of National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) collected in-year	98.1	98.3	98.3	98.3
3. Reduction of Council Tax arrears brought forward (figure is a target percentage reduction of the arrears brought forward from the previous financial year).	£4.5m	£3.79	36%	36%
4. Average time to process new claims to housing benefit (days)	15.4	16.3	20.0	19.0
5. Average time for changes of circumstances for housing benefit (days)	3.21	3.84	5	4
6. Average time taken to process Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support new claims and charge events (days)	3.89	4.59	7	7
7. Cashable Savings identified achieved by the Corporate Fraud Team (a cashable savings is money either to be recovered or prevented	n/a	n/a	£100k	£110k

from being paid)				
8. Non-Cashable Savings identified achieved by the Corporate Fraud Team (non-cashable savings are notional figures applied to a range of activities of potential losses to the Council)	1.944m	2.513m	£2.5m	£2.6m

Notes:

Measure 1 - the targets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 have been reduced to take account of the 8% reduction in council tax support that is added to the council tax debit due for collection from 2019/20. The target set is at the higher end of the top quartile for North East Authorities (96.54% to 98.04% based on latest collection information available.

Measure 3 – The targets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 have been converted from a cash value to a percentage of the arrears carried forward

Measure 4 – the targets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 have been increased to take into consideration the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit Full Service in Northumberland which reduces the numbers of new claims dramatically where only new claims for pensioner caseload or those of working age are the most complicated cases which will take longer to process

Measure 6 – the target for 2019/20 and 2020/21 have been increased to take into consideration the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit Full Service in Northumberland which reduces the numbers of new claims dramatically where only new claims for pensioner caseload or those of working age are the most complicated cases which will take longer to process. Data available for quarter 4 following the roll out of Universal Credit in Northumberland has been used as the baseline for this target.

Measures - 7 and 8 have been created from the original indicator of total savings achieved by the Corporate Fraud Team. The original measure had a total amount as the target. Measure 7 is Cashable Savings identified achieved by the Corporate Fraud Team (a cashable savings is money either to be recovered or prevented from being paid). Measure 8 is Non-Cashable Savings identified achieved by the Corporate Fraud Team (non-cashable savings are notional figures applied to a range of activities of potential losses to the Council).