

## **SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Customer & Community Scrutiny Panel  
**DATE:** 8<sup>th</sup> December 2021

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Chris Boylett – Interim Group Manager Revenues, Benefits and Charges  
**(For all Enquiries)**

**WARD(S):** All

### **PART I/PART II**

*(Part I is the “open” agenda, Part II relates to exempt items).  
Please seek advice from the appropriate Committee Administrator*

### **FOR COMMENT & CONSIDERATION**

#### **Performance update for Revenues and Benefits Service**

##### **1. Purpose of Report**

To provide the Customer & Community Scrutiny Panel with an overview of the performance of the Revenues, Benefits and Charges service during the current financial year. The period of reporting is for April 2021 to October 2021.

The report also explains the actions being taken to improve performance across the Revenues Benefits and Charges service Review.

##### **2. Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The Committee is requested to note and comment on the report and the actions being taken by the Service.

##### **3a. Slough Wellbeing Strategy Priorities**

The provision of an effective Revenues and Benefits service supports the Wellbeing strategy through insuring that residents that are financially challenged receive the support they need to maintain their home. When collecting income for the authority the service ensures that it considers the affordability of repayments and looks to ensure that financial hardship is not worsened when collecting debts. These aims support the third of the wellbeing strategies priorities to ensure strong, healthy and attractive neighbourhoods.

To further support the current and future healthcare and wellbeing of our residents, the Welfare Team covers the provision of housing benefits for Slough’s residents with a specific outreach programme targeted to support our most vulnerable members of the community. The Neighbourhood Benefit and Money Advice Officers role includes working with community groups and the third sector to increase awareness of both benefits and grants available with a view to maximising income where entitlement and eligibility criteria are met. To maximise benefit take up activities as below are included in the workplan:

- Home visits to elderly / vulnerable people

- Reviewing referrals from other departments in the Council and external agencies
- Working with agencies such as, New Horizons, Tele-care, Slough Food bank, SHOC and Talking Therapies
- Networking and fostering new partnerships with organisations such as: Shari Driver - Surrey Disabled Peoples Partnership (who also provide advocacy for Slough residents) Dementia Advisor - Slough Older Person's Mental Health Memory Clinic Upton Hospital and Hestia (domestic violence advocates)

### 3b. **Five Year Plan Outcomes**

The service underpins all of the outcomes the council strives to deliver within its five year plan, either directly or indirectly, directly by ensuring residents received the appropriate support they need when they are in hardship, it supports the provision of housing through the payment of housing benefit and collection of rents. The collection of the Business Improvement District levy supports the investment in that key part of the town. Also the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates is the main source of funding for the LA and therefore the collection of these underpins all of the five year plan outcomes.

### 4. **Other Implications**

#### (a) Financial

There are no financial implications contained within this for note report. Any investment that arises from the service improvement plans will be reported separately.

#### (b) Risk Management

There are no risks associated with this for note report.

#### (c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are not any Human Rights Act Implications.

### 5. **Supporting Information**

- 5.1 The service has faced a number of challenges over the past 2 years including the return of the service from Arvato the Councils external provider and the CoVid pandemic that. Both of these events have put a strain on the service and its staff which has led to performance being lower than expected. More recently the performance of the service has also been highlighted in recent reports issued in relation to the councils 114 notice.
- 5.2 Performance is measured against a number of internal targets aimed at delivering high quality services to residents. These targets are stretching and take into account performance of similar authorities whilst also reflecting current local and economic pressures. It is clear that given the impacts of the pandemic and the decisions made to defer recovery action during 2020/21 performance has been impacted. The limitations put on the service by the court service and challenges with resourcing this, it is therefore not expected that council tax collection will

return to pre-pandemic levels until 2022/23. The following targets have been set for 2021/22

- Benefits New Claims Processing 20 days
- Benefits Change of circumstance Processing 10 days
- Council Tax Collection (In year) 94.5%
- Business rates Collection (In year) 94.5%
- Rent collections
  - HRA 97.0%
  - Garages 99.0%
  - Temporary Accom 90.0%
  - James Elliman 87.5%

5.3 Benefits performance during 2021/22 has been below target with new claims being processed in an average of 30.88 days for the period April to end of October 2021 and change of circumstances processed in an average of 13.08 days for the same period. although performance has improved in recent months as outstanding work continues to be cleared. Performance in October for New Claims was 27.52 and 9.4 days for changes in circumstance.

5.4 It is expected that the Changes in Circumstances will reach the annual target, but it is unlikely that the turnaround times on average for new claims will be as low as 20 days for the financial year

5.5 Performance has been impacted by a number of factors during the year including resourcing issues, difficulty in recruiting suitable experienced temporary staff, reductions in the level of overtime being worked earlier in the year, and increased demands on the service as a result of the prevailing economic conditions.

5.6 Council Tax performance during 2021/22 is showing signs of improvement against 2020/21. In comparison with other Berkshire authorities' collection has improved by more than any other. To the end of October 2021, a collection rate of 63.1% had been reached, this is 1.14% ahead of the same time last year (61.96%) but still lower than the previous year.

5.7 Collection has been impacted by similar resourcing challenges faced by the benefits teams but has also had limitations placed on the volumes of cases that can be progressed by the courts service which have delayed some recovery actions.

5.8 Business rates collection for the 2021/22 financial year to the end of October is also showing improvement with collection at 58.7% up 2.28% on 2020/21 (56.425). Only one other authority in Berkshire has seen an increase in collection during this year. All authorities are still showing significant reductions in collection to pre-pandemic levels.

5.9 Collection rates continue to be influenced by the impacts of the pandemic and the ongoing challenges for businesses across the economy. Slough's collection is also impacted in part by the late application of changes in retail relief, due to software issues, which has meant that collection of charges on these accounts started 1 month later than expected.

5.10 Rents collection is improving with overall collection reaching 96.9% at the end of October although this is impacted by levels of collection on James Elliman House

properties which house vulnerable tenants that have chaotic lifestyles and rely on benefit payments to meet their rental liabilities. Residents also have service charges (heating and hot water) which are not covered by housing benefit or Universal Credit Housing charges and are at a level that is a significant proportion of their benefits.

Rent Recovery Officer	SBC Current Collection Rate (%)	Rent Collected (£)	Target Amount (97.5%)	Plus/Minus (includes c/f arrears spread over the current number of weeks)	Current Arrears Rate %
North	95.87%	£8,952,584	£9,104,697	-£152,113	3.61%
South	95.73%	£3,438,792	£3,502,388	-£63,596	3.86%
East	96.37%	£8,137,995	£8,233,162	-£95,167	4.07%
All teams	96.05%	£20,529,371	£20,840,247	-£310,876	3.84%
Garages	96.41%	£216,101	£218,551	-£2,450	3.40%
Temporary accommodation	92.47%	£1,016,303	£1,071,539	-£55,236	4.80%
Daily rents	85.79%	£827,821	£940,792	-£112,971	5.18%
James Elliman Weekly (AST)	85.28%	£1,009,173	£1,153,847	-£144,674	10.95%
<b>Average of performance</b> 95.99%					
Current Arrears Rate 3.84%					

5.11 In order to ensure the service continues to improve and is structured for long term success a review of current processes and technology is underway. This will identify areas of improvement and opportunities to value for money.

5.12 In response an action plan has been developed to address the weaknesses This service improvement plan also incorporates all of the actions needed to deliver a long-term high performing and sustainable service to residents. This plan is currently being assessed and costed as part of the wider financial plans for the council. It is expected that the work required to deliver all of the required improvements and embed new processes and structures will take up to 2 years to implement.

## 6. Conclusion

Members of the panel are asked to note the current performance levels and the actions being taken to address areas of under-performance.

## 7. Background Papers

None