



To: Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board

On: 31 March 2022

Report by: Director of Finance and Resources

Heading: Customer & Business Services Performance Report

1. **Summary**

1.1 This report details performance across key Customer & Business Service (CBS) functions including revenue collection and benefit administration for the period ending 28 February 2022 (including an update on the funding and expenditure position in relation to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and the Scottish Welfare Fund). This report also provides a performance update in relation to customer services provision for February and year to date.

2. **Recommendations**

2.1 It is recommended that the Board:

- Note the contents of the report.

3. Revenue Collection

3.1 Council Tax

3.1.1 This section details the collection performance as at 28th February 2022 for Council Tax. It also provides details of the total sums collected for the previous financial year.

3.1.2 The billable sum for 2021/22 is £89,043,000.

3.1.3 The sums collected to date for 2021/22 are £83,717,996 which is 94.02% of the billable sum. This represents an increase of 0.91% in cash collection as a proportion of net charges billed compared with the same position for 2020/21. Aligned with other local authorities, recovery action had been suspended during the earlier part of the previous financial year leading to reduced/delayed income.

3.1.4 The Council Tax Reduction awarded is £13,450,391 amounting to 13.12% of the billable sum, which is 1.17% less than at the same point last year.

3.1.5 The Service continues to encourage the take-up of Council Tax Reduction. Activities planned for the new financial year will include close tracking of potential applications and data matching to maximise Council Tax Reduction awards.

3.2 Non-Domestic Rates

3.2.1 This section details the collection performance as at 28th February 2022 for Non-Domestic Rates (NDR). It also provides details of the total sums collected for the last financial year.

3.2.2 The Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) charges billed for 2021/22 amount to £89,740,011, this is significantly higher than the levied amount of £78,141,450 for 2020/21. Reduced take-up of Covid-19 reliefs by larger retailers largely accounts for the increase.

3.2.3 The cash receipts to date amount to £82,238,434 which is 91.64% of the sum billed. This is an increase in cash collection as a proportion of net charges billed of 10.78% compared with the same position for 2020/21.

3.2.4 During 2020/21 the introduction of Covid-19 reliefs, and delays in the provision of software changes to deal with these, delayed the billing of Non-Domestic Rates till July. Consequently, payment collection only commenced in August 2020 as opposed to the normal May date.

4. Benefit administration

4.1. This section details the processing performance in relation to Housing Benefit and the Scottish Welfare Fund, as at the end of February 2022. Also provided is an update on the funding and expenditure position in relation to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and the Scottish Welfare Fund.

4.2 The Service continues to balance the varied and changing workload resulting from the impact of the pandemic, in particular the significant resources required to support Self-Isolation Support Grants.

4.3 Speed of Processing – Housing/Council Tax Benefit

4.3.1 As detailed in Table 1 below, processing speed for New Claims is within target for the period and well within target for the year to date.

4.3.2 In relation to New Claims processed within 14 days of all information received, this measure is also over target for the period but within target for the year to date.

4.3.3 Processing of Changes in Circumstance (CIC) is well within target for the year to date but over the target for the reporting period, as with New Claims processing, this was due to resources being utilised to support a significant and sustained spike in Self Isolation Support Grant applications.

(Supplementary processing information is attached in Appendix 2 for members' reference)

Table 1 – Performance Summary

Performance measure	4 Week Reporting Period 14 January 2022 to 10 February 2022	Year to date position	Annual Target
New Claims – processing time	24 days	18 days	24 days
New Claims - % processed within 14 days of all information received	89%	93 %	92%
Changes in Circumstance – processing time	15 days	8 days	10 days

4.4 Discretionary Housing Payments

4.4.1 The total budget for Discretionary Housing Payments for 2021/22 is shown in table 2 below, this includes an additional amount of £100k allocated by the Council and £90,000 added in January from Flexible Funding for Financial Insecurity resources which were provided to the Council by the Scottish Government.

4.4.2 Funding for DHP was previously provided to Local Authorities by the Department for Work and Pensions, following the new social security powers devolved to the Scottish Government (SG), DHP funding is now provided entirely by SG. The total budget is detailed in table 2 below and shows the indicative spending spilt provided to the Council.

- 4.4.3 The DHP budget has been calculated to include the full Scottish Government estimate of the amount of funding required to fully mitigate the effect of the Bedroom Tax. This estimate includes a 20% reserve allocation which will be paid in May 2022, if required.
- 4.4.4 In line with DHP Policy and DHP Regulations, the Service makes awards to fully mitigate the effect of the Bedroom Tax and maximise spend within the year.
- 4.4.5 Table 3 shows the performance information in relation to DHPs. The table shows that processing time in relation to DHP is within target, year to date.

Table 2 – DHP Budget

Funding – indicative allocations	amount
Renfrewshire Council	£100,000
Financial Insecurity Winter Funding	£90,000
Financial Hardship (non-Benefit Cap) – Scottish Government	£230,932
Financial Hardship (Benefit Cap) – Scottish Government	£180,862
Bedroom Tax* – Scottish Government	£2,468,924
Total budget for the year	£3,070,718

*This figure represents the maximum amount required to cover the estimated shortfall of customers impacted by the Bedroom Tax.

Table 3 – DHP Performance Summary

Measure	1 April 2021 to 28 February 2022
Volume of DHP applications received	5,320 applications
Volume of DHP decisions made	5,114 decisions
Number of DHP awards	5,019 awards
Average processing time (target 29 days)	10 days
Total amount committed/paid	£2,761,862

4.5 The Scottish Welfare Fund

- 4.5.1 The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) provides a safety net for vulnerable people on low incomes through the provision of Community Care Grants and Crisis Grants. The Scottish Welfare Fund is a national scheme, underpinned by law and delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government by all local councils. The SWF replaced elements of the Social Fund abolished by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2013.
- 4.5.2 The Service makes awards in 2021/22 in line with Scottish Government guidance and had spent 82% of its total budget for the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) by the end of February 2022.
- 4.5.3 The Scottish Government allocated additional resources of £22 million across Scotland to meet additional demand for Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants, arising because of COVID-19. This resulted in an additional £0.782M being allocated to Renfrewshire, £0.424M of which is available in the 2021/22 budget.
- 4.5.4 The budget was further increased in January with £160k from Flexible Funding for Financial Insecurity resources which were provided to the Council by the Scottish Government.
- 4.5.5 The performance data relating to the Fund is presented in table 4 below. The Service has processed Crisis and Community Care Grants within target, however due to exceptional demand levels were not able to meet the extremely stretching 1 day target for SISGs.
- 4.5.6 From October 2020, the Scottish Government committed to providing a grant of £500 to individuals who are in receipt of low-income benefits and who lost income because they are required to self-isolate to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- 4.5.7 The Scottish Welfare Fund was determined to be the legislative and delivery mechanism for Self-Isolation Support Grants (SISGs) in the form of Crisis Grants, as they are designed to provide occasional support to people facing immediate financial need which poses a risk to their health and wellbeing.
- 4.5.8 The Service made necessary operational arrangements to support the assessment, processing, and payment of SISGs. During January and February an average of 1,928 applications were received compared to a monthly average of 654 prior to the Omicron variant.

Table 4 – SWF Performance Summary (Crisis & Community Care Grants)

Measure	1 April 2021 to 28 February 2022
Number of Crisis Grant applications received	8,922
Number of Crisis Grant Awards	6,154
Total amount paid for Crisis Grants	£617,115
Average Processing time (2 working days target)	2 days
Average Processing time within February	2 days
Number of Community Care Grant applications received	2,372
Number of Community Care Grant Awards	1,288
Total amount paid for Community Care Grant	£894,107
Average processing time year to date (15 working days target)	10 days
Average processing time within February	8 days
Total amount paid/committed from the fund	£1,511,222
Budget from Winter Fund	£160,000
Budget provided by Scottish Government	£1,675,804
Total Budget	£1,835,804

Table 5 – SWF Performance Summary (Self-Isolation Support Grants) (SISG)

Measure	1 April 2021 to 28 February 2022
Number of SISG applications received	10,962
Number of SISG Awards	6,916
Average Processing time year to date (1 working day target)	7 days
Average Processing time within February	10 days
Total amount paid/committed from the fund	£3,458,000
Budget provided by Scottish Government	£3,458,000

5. Cost of Living Awards

- 5.1 The Scottish Government has introduced this support to help households tackle the increasing cost of living.
- 5.2 These awards will be credited to all households who had a liability to pay Council Tax and who were either residing in properties in valuation bands A to D, or were in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, as at 14/02/2022. This will result in reduced instalments due across the year.
- 5.3 Only one award of £150.00 can be made for each occupied qualifying property.
- 5.4 Eligible categories of households exempt from Council Tax, i.e. with no liability, will be invited to provide details online from the end of March so that a payment can be made to them directly.

6 Customer Service Provision

- 6.1 This section details the performance of the customer service for February 2022, and the current year to date position. The report provides an update on the overall contact centre call handling volumes and service level.

Face to Face services have now resumed in Renfrewshire House, with these being managed on an appointment basis. Details of customer volumes are provided in this report.

Demand for Digital Services continues, and this report will update members on the level of online transactions being completed.

6.2 Telephone Call handling

- 6.2.1 High level monthly summary – for the month of February, the contact centre received 25,597 calls and answered 97% against a primary target of 90% for the period.

Table 6 – Customer Service Unit – Primary Target (call handling)

Primary target	Year	Calls Received	February Performance	Year to Date
90% calls answered	2022	25,597	97%	97%
	2021	27,462	95%	96%

- 6.2.3 The contact centre achieved the primary target of answering 90% of all calls. The percentage of calls answered remains higher for the month and year to date compared to the same period last year. Although calls for the month were below February 2021 levels, year to date the calls received are at a similar level to the same period last year.

6.2.4 The secondary target is to respond to 70% of all calls within 40 seconds

Table 7 – Customer Service Unit – Secondary Target (call handling)

Secondary target	Year	February Performance	Year to Date
70% calls in 40 seconds	2022	56%	62%
	2021	52%	68%

6.2.5 The contact centre performance was below the target of answering 70% of calls in 40 seconds, although performance was higher than the same month last year.

Year to date, the service level remains below target however this has remained steady since the last reporting period due to ongoing recruitment and training activity across the team.

The performance was impacted in February, mainly due to adverse weather as a result of four named storms occurring throughout the month. Adverse weather increases demand for certain services, creating challenges for services like Housing Repairs, Environmental and Roads and Lighting Faults. This concentration in demand creates a reduction in performance in these groups which results in a reduced overall service level.

6.3 Face to face provision

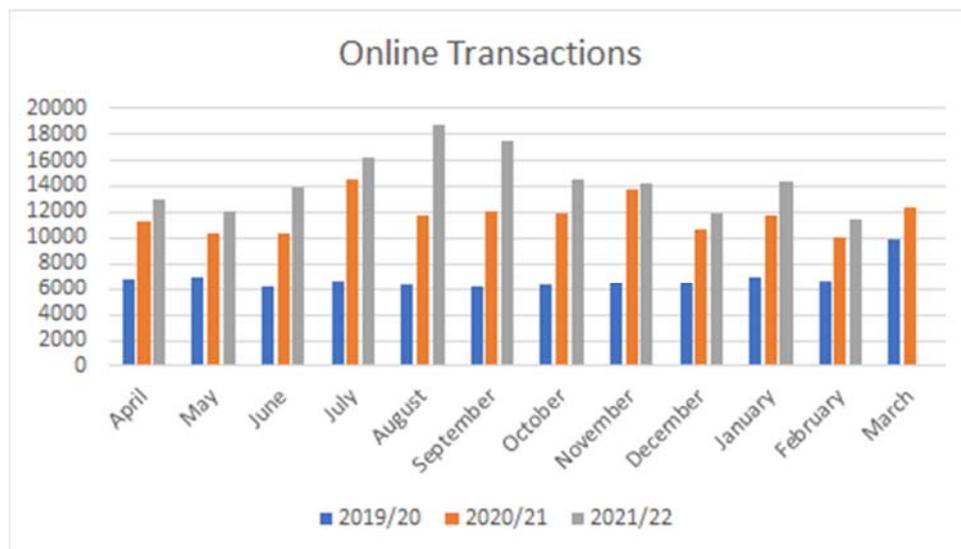
6.3.1 The Customer Service Centre in Paisley continues to offer face to face support to customers by appointment where this is required.

6.3.2 The following table shows the volume of customers who received face to face service in Paisley during the month of February 2022.

Service	Total Customers
Birth Registration	138
Marriage Registration	57
Licensing	106
TOTAL	301

6.4 Digital Services

- 6.4.1 The council continues to see an increase in the use of their online services with a further 10,338 new users registered on the platform since the start of this financial year. This continues the trend seen throughout last year, with a total of 24,254 new users since the start of the pandemic. The number of users on the Council's MyAccount service now equates to 98% of all households in Renfrewshire, compared to 69% of households in March 2020.
- 6.4.2 The level of online transactions also continues to rise, with a 119% increase in customers using the MyAccount platform to request Council Services compared to the same period in 2019. The graph below shows the level of online transactions per month since the start of April 2019.
- 6.4.3 Since the start of this financial year there have been 157,816 transactions supported on the MyAccount platform, compared to 128,424 during the same period last year and 72,031 in the same period in 2019/20.



Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** - The level of collection of Local Taxation continues to provide funding for the delivery of Council services throughout Renfrewshire.
2. **HR & Organisational Development** – None
3. **Community/Council Planning** –
 - Our Renfrewshire is fair - An effective Benefits service is vital to the quality of life of many of our citizens as it provides vital support for low income households to sustain tenancies and meet their rent obligations
 - Working together to improve outcomes - An efficient and effective billing and administrative process for the collection of local taxes is vital for ensuring the recovery of income to the council to support the provision of local services. This is supported by a range of payment opportunities for the public, including electronic and digital payments (e.g. Direct Debit, Website and Telephone).
 - Working together to improve outcomes – An efficient and effective Customer Service Unit is vital to ensuring citizens have equality of access to Council services whether this is digitally, by telephone or face to face
4. **Legal** – None
5. **Property/Assets** - None
6. **Information Technology** – None
7. **Equality & Human Rights** - The recommendations contained within this report in relation to performance updates has been considered in relation to its impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report because it is for consideration of performance only. In terms of the LIPP, Renfrewshire Council is acting as delivery agent for Scottish Government policy and is following Scottish Government guidance on how to implement and delivery the LIPP. As such the equality and human rights impacts of this policy are a matter for Scottish Government.
8. **Health & Safety** - None
9. **Procurement** – None
10. **Risk** - None
11. **Privacy Impact** – None
12. **Cosla Policy Position** – None

13. **Climate Risk** – None

List of Background Papers

(a) None

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Appendix 1

RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

REVENUES COLLECTION STATEMENT AS AT 28th FEBRUARY 2022

COUNCIL TAX	2020/21 £m	2021/22 £m
Projected Yield	97.740	98.307
Gross Charges	100.795	102.493
Less rebates	14.298	13.450
Net Charges Billed	<u>86.497</u>	<u>89.043</u>
Cash Collected	82.279	83.718
Rebate Grant	14.298	13.450
	<u>96.577</u>	<u>97.168</u>
Cash collected as % of Net Charges	95.12%	94.02%
Income as % of Projected Yield	98.81%	98.84%

NON DOMESTIC RATES	2020/21 £m	2021/22 £m
Projected Yield	76.579	87.945
Gross Charges	145.189	145.552
Less reliefs	67.047	55.812
Net Charges Billed	<u>78.141</u>	<u>89.740</u>
Cash Collected	73.928	82.238
Cash collected as % of Net Charges	94.61%	91.64%
Cash collected as % of Projected Yield	96.54%	93.51%

Customer & Business Services Performance Report – Appendix 2 Supplementary KPIs – Finance & Resources Policy Board

APPEALS

Where a claimant disputes a Benefits decision and also disputes a revision decision they can formally make an Appeal. The Benefits Service will prepare a detailed submission which is then considered by the Independent Tribunals Service. Preparation of a submission is a very involved process and requires significant data gathering.

Target processing speed (number of days)	60		
Result: last 3 months (days)	December: 104 days	January: 43 days	February: Nil
Average (12 months to date)	83 days		
Average Appeals Completed	3 Appeals per month		

Comment:- Appeals volumes are very low, which is expected due to reducing Housing Benefit caseload. Monthly target was missed due to resources being spread to support Self-Isolation Support Grants, however returned to within target in January.

REVISIONS

Where a claimant disputes a benefits decision in the first instance, they can request for it to be looked at again. This is known as a Revision. The process involves a Senior Benefit Assessor reviewing the decision thoroughly to decide whether the decision should stand.

Target	28 days		
Result last report	October 21: 32	November 21: 47	December 21: 49
Result Last 3 months	December 21: 49	January 22: 59	February 22: 47

Comment:- The Service has missed target for revisions processing as a result of balancing workloads, including the processing of Self-Isolation Support Grants, it is anticipated that it will be back within target by next reporting cycle.

ACCURACY

The Service proactively monitors the accuracy of benefits decisions made through a robust audit checking programme. The Service targets to audit 4% of all calculations. The actual level of checking for this reporting period is higher due to a number of new staff joining the Benefits team and therefore requiring 100% of their work to be checked.

	Target %	Actual %
Volume of Audits 2021/22	4%	28%
Accuracy – February 22	95%	Nil
Accuracy – 2021/22	95%	90%

Comment:- The Service had to temporarily suspend accuracy checks during February to support the processing of Self Isolation Support Grants. The service will continue to analyse errors and action trends/patterns by providing additional guidance/training where needed.

Customer & Business Services Performance Report – Appendix 2 Supplementary KPIs – Finance & Resources Policy Board

HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS

The service is responsible for raising overpayments where Housing Benefit has been paid in error. If these have resulted from errors made by claimants, the cost is partially funded by the DWP. The service attempts to recover both newly raised and historic debts from claimants or landlords as appropriate. In year collections performance is detailed below and shows an improved position since the last report with slightly less outstanding total debt and improved raised and recovered statistics.

Overpayments raised 2021/22	£744,268
Overpayments raised and recovered in year	£275,546
% Recovery	37.02%
All recovery in year	£979,979
All recovery vs raised in year	131.67%
All recovery vs all debt	11.88%
Total debt outstanding at end of reporting period	£7,270,342