

North Lanarkshire Council Report

Finance and Resources Committee

Does this report require to be approved? Yes No

Ref EK / GT

Date 20/11/24

Revenues and Benefits Update

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Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the performance within the Revenues and Benefits functions of Finance as at 30 September 2024.

Key points to note include:

- As at 30 September 2024, 55.59% of Council Tax due for 2024/25 had been collected. This is an increase of 0.30% from the same period last financial year.
- Non-Domestic Rates collection at 30 September 2024 is 42.91% of the total annual charge. This is an increase of 0.11% from the same period last financial year.
- The service continues to meet statutory timescales for administering benefits applications and changes of circumstance.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Finance and Resources Committee:

- (1) Acknowledge the content of the report.

The Plan for North Lanarkshire

Priority	Improve North Lanarkshire's resource base
Ambition statement	(21) Continue to identify and access opportunities to leverage additional resources to support our ambitions
Programme of Work	Statutory / corporate / service requirement

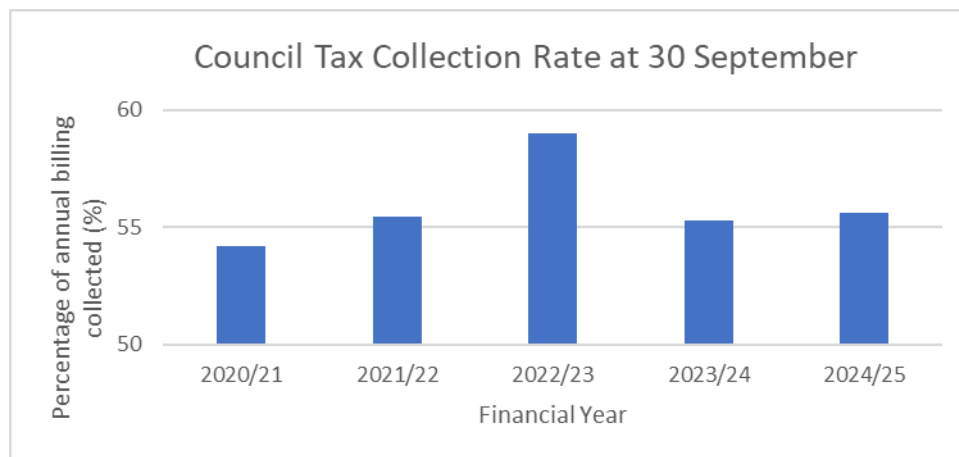
1. Background

- 1.1 The Finance service is responsible for the administration and collection of all local taxation in North Lanarkshire in the form of Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates.
- 1.2 In addition, the service administers a number of benefits for residents of North Lanarkshire including Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payment, Free School Meals, Clothing Grants and Blue Badges.

2. Report

Council Tax

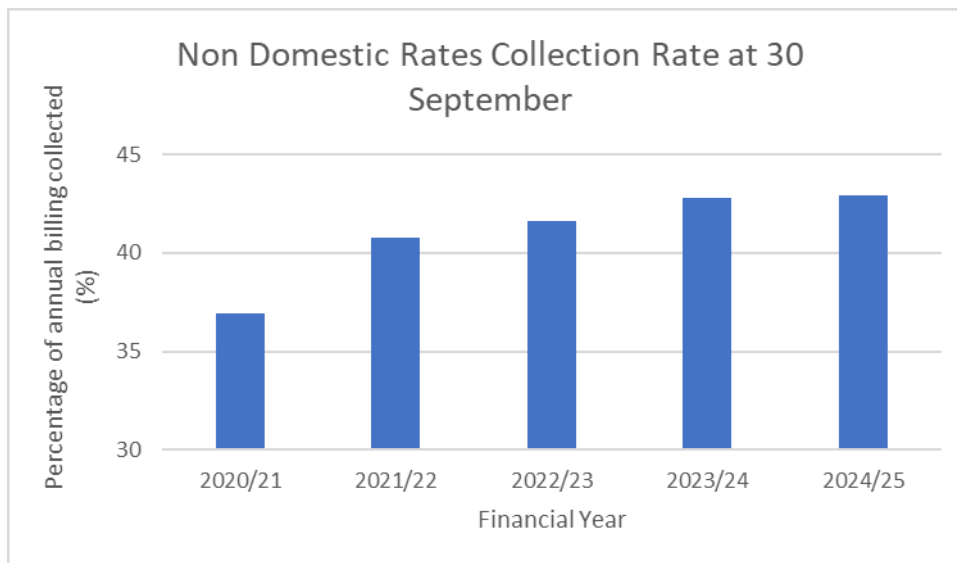
- 2.1 The graph below shows the cash collected at 31 September for each financial year. It is worth noting that cash is allocated to specific Council Tax years so the graph represents cash received against the initial billing year (i.e. billed and received in 2024/25) and does not include cash collected in subsequent years (i.e. billed in 2023/24 but received in 2024/25). This ensures a like for like comparison.



- 2.2 The collection figure to 30 September in the 2024/25 financial year of 55.59% is 0.30% higher than the same period last financial year.
- 2.3 It should be noted that in-year collection of Council Tax is a Statutory Performance Indicator. However, it does not reflect the overall collection rate of Council Tax which includes collection of prior year arrears. This latter measure has a greater bearing on the Council's finances and is reflected in the regular budget monitoring reports to Committee.

Non-Domestic Rates

2.4 The following graph shows the cash collected at 30 September for each financial year:



2.5 The collection figure to 30 September in the 2024/25 financial year is 22.91%. This represents an increase of 0.11% compared to the same time period in 2023/24.

Housing Benefits

2.6 The data below highlights the Statutory Performance Indicators measuring the speed of processing for new Housing Benefit claims and for changes in circumstances. The table below shows the cumulative figures for the 2024/25 financial year.

Days to Process	2023/24	2024/25	Latest available Scottish average
New Claims	16	14	17
Change of Circumstances	9	10	2

2.7 The service continues to perform well in the speed of processing for new claims compared to the most recent Scottish average. The speed and accuracy of processing has been commented on positively by the Department for Work and Pensions during recent liaison discussions.

2.8 The service also continues to meet statutory requirements for the speed of processing changes of circumstance. To further improve efficiency the service is progressing a number of digital related improvements such as development of the Landlord Portal and robotic process automation for a number of high-volume tasks. The Landlord Portal has recently gone live; therefore, it is anticipated that this action will see an improvement in the handling of correspondence received direct from landlords

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

2.9 As at 30 September 2024 a total of £26.333m in Council Tax Reduction has been awarded for the 2024/25 financial year. This compares to £25.980m to the same period during 2023/24, representing an increase of £0.353m (1.36%).

- 2.10 The service received 3,445 applications between 1 April and 30 September 2024 compared with 3,994 during 2023/24, representing an decrease of 13.7%
- 2.11 The service received an increased number of notifications for changes in circumstances. From 1 April to 30 September 2024 a total of 75,264 changes were processed compared to 61,495 for the previous financial year; an increase of 22.4%.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

- 2.12 From 1 April 2017 funding for DHP has been devolved to Scottish Government. This funding supports both the Scottish Government's commitment to fully fund the implications of the Bedroom Tax and an additional sum available for other reasons such as the Benefit cap and the restrictions on Local Housing Allowance rates.
- 2.13 From 1 January 2023 the Scottish Government is fully funding the implications of mitigating the benefit cap. This was announced as part of the tackling child poverty delivery plan 'Best Start, Bright Futures' in March 2022. Local authority Leaders have agreed to fuller benefit cap mitigation through the DHP scheme from 1st January 2023. For 2024/25 the Scottish Government has provided ring-fenced funding of £0.436m to mitigate the benefit cap. As at 30 September, the amount paid and committed in respect of the benefit cap was £0.047m (11%).
- 2.14 As at 30 September 2024 the total paid and committed in respect of Bedroom Tax was £5.723m. In comparison, this sum was £5.462m at the same point during 2023/24.
- 2.15 In addition the Council also receives £0.459m in respect of non-bedroom tax related issues. An additional £0.051m has been received for 2024/25 due to a redistribution of collective unused funds for 2023/24 bringing the total budget to £0.511m. As at 30 September 2024 £0.304m (60%) has been paid or committed from the fund.
- 2.16 As in previous years, the service will continue liaising with colleagues in Housing and Housing Associations to encourage applications to the fund. In addition, the service will also liaise with Universal Credit claimants affected by the benefit cap who could possibly be eligible for the mitigation.

Scottish Welfare Fund

- 2.17 The Council has administered the Scottish Government's Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) since 1 April 2016.
- 2.18 The Scottish Government provides an annual award budget of £2.760m to North Lanarkshire Council. As highlighted at the previous Committee, now that additional one-off funding has been exhausted the service has started the 2024/25 financial year assessing applications at High priority. This means that applications will only be considered where there is immediate and severe need, applicants are highly vulnerable, where there will be significantly adverse impacts to health and wellbeing with a no grant award and where the effect of the grant is immediate and substantial. Staff assessing Scottish Welfare Fund applications are highly trained in making these judgements in accordance with the statutory guidance and where an application is unsuccessful they will signpost the applicant to other community based supports.
- 2.19 There are two grant schemes and their relative performance during 2024/25 and prior year comparison is as follows:

2024/25

	Applications Assessed	Awards	Unsuccessful Applications	Acceptance Rate
Crisis Grants	10,079	7,249	2,830	71.9%
Community Care Grants	2,565	1,838	727	71.6%
Total	12,644	9,087	3,557	71.8%

2023/24

	Applications Assessed	Awards	Unsuccessful Applications	Acceptance Rate
Crisis Grants	10,109	7,864	2,425	77.7%
Community Care Grants	2,707	2,215	492	81.8%
Total	12,816	10,079	2,917	78.6%

- 2.20 As at 30 September 2024, the total financial value of grants paid from the Scottish Welfare Fund amounted to £1.971m which represents 71.4% of the total budget for the current financial year. The Scottish Welfare Fund is highly likely to overspend in the current financial year so the service may have to consider moving to assess applications at High and Most Compelling priority in accordance with Scottish Government guidance. The financial impact will be managed through other underspends materialising within the Finance division and the wider Chief Executive's service.
- 2.21 During 2024/25, the Scottish Welfare Fund has seen a small decrease in demand for Crisis applications of 0.7% and a slight reduction in demand for Community Care Grant applications of 5.3%.
- 2.22 The Service strives to assess applications within the timescales outlined within Scottish Government guidance. Throughout the period the service has largely continued to assess Crisis applications within the two working day time limit. It has been more challenging to meet the 15 working day time limit for Community Care Grants with the service currently assessing applications outwith that timeframe, however, the service fastracks applications linked to homelessness to support the wider Rapid Rehousing and Homes First strategies.

Clothing Grants and Free School Meals

- 2.23 The Finance service administers Clothing Grant payments and applications for Free School Meals on behalf of the Council for families meeting low-income eligibility criteria.
- 2.24 Up to 30 September 2024 the service administered and paid out 11,512 Clothing Grants compared to 11,363 by the end of September 2023.
- 2.25 The Service awarded 9,876 Free School Meal applications to 30 September 2024 compared to 9,958 to the same period in 2023.

Blue Badges

- 2.26 The Finance service administers the Blue Badge scheme in accordance with Scottish Government guidance. The eligibility criteria means that some are automatically entitled to a Blue Badge. In other cases, the Council assesses an individual's eligibility

which may include the requirement for a mobility assessment and meeting a healthcare professional.

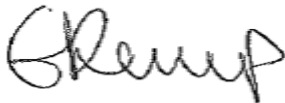
- 2.27 As at 30 September 2024, the service administered 6,246 Blue Badge applications with 4,720 awarded (75.6% award rate). Over the same period in the 2023/24 financial year the service administered 4,915 applications with 3,735 awarded (76.0% award rate).
- 2.28 Scottish Government guidance states that applicants should receive a decision on their application in around 12 weeks. The Council is currently reaching a decision within 6 weeks.

3. Measures of success

- 3.1 Continuous improvement in processing and collection rates.

4. Supporting documentation

None



Elaine Kemp
Chief Officer (Finance)

5. Impacts

<p>5.1 Public Sector Equality Duty and Fairer Scotland Duty Does the report contain information that has an impact as a result of the Public Sector Equality Duty and/or Fairer Scotland Duty? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact?</p> <p>If Yes, has an assessment been carried out and published on the council's website? https://www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/your-community/equalities/equality-and-fairer-scotland-duty-impact-assessments Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
<p>5.2 Financial impact Does the report contain any financial impacts? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, have all relevant financial impacts been discussed and agreed with Finance? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact?</p>
<p>5.3 HR policy impact Does the report contain any HR policy or procedure impacts? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, have all relevant HR impacts been discussed and agreed with People Resources? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact?</p>
<p>5.4 Legal impact Does the report contain any legal impacts (such as general legal matters, statutory considerations (including employment law considerations), or new legislation)? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, have all relevant legal impacts been discussed and agreed with Legal and Democratic? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact?</p>
<p>5.5 Data protection impact Does the report / project / practice contain or involve the processing of personal data? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, is the processing of this personal data likely to result in a high risk to the data subject? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If Yes, has a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) been carried out and e-mailed to dataprotection@northlan.gov.uk Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>

<p>5.6</p>	<p>Technology / Digital impact Does the report contain information that has an impact on either technology, digital transformation, service redesign / business change processes, data management, or connectivity / broadband / Wi-Fi? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact? The Service has been liaising with Business and Digital on the Landlord Portal and RPA developments and these will be managed in line with Business and Digital's available resources.</p> <p>Where the impact identifies a requirement for significant technology change, has an assessment been carried out (or is scheduled to be carried out) by the Enterprise Architecture Governance Group (EAGG)? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>
<p>5.7</p>	<p>Environmental / Carbon impact Does the report / project / practice contain information that has an impact on any environmental or carbon matters? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact?</p>
<p>5.8</p>	<p>Communications impact Does the report contain any information that has an impact on the council's communications activities? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact?</p>
<p>5.9</p>	<p>Risk impact Is there a risk impact? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the key risks and potential impacts, highlighting where the risk(s) are assessed and recorded (e.g. Corporate or Service or Project Risk Registers), and how they are managed?</p>
<p>5.10</p>	<p>Armed Forces Covenant Duty Does the report require to take due regard of the Armed Forces Covenant Duty (i.e. does it relate to healthcare, housing, or education services for in-Service or ex-Service personnel, or their families, or widow(er)s)? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the provision which has been made to ensure there has been appropriate consideration of the particular needs of the Armed Forces community to make sure that they do not face disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public services.</p>
<p>5.11</p>	<p>Children's rights and wellbeing impact Does the report contain any information regarding any council activity, service delivery, policy, or plan that has an impact on children and young people up to the age of 18, or on a specific group of these? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If Yes, please provide a brief summary of the impact and the provision that has been made to ensure there has been appropriate consideration of the relevant Articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).</p> <p>If Yes, has a Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA) been carried out? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>