

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
FOREST HEATH DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL
WAVENEY DISTRICT COUNCIL
SUFFOLK COASTAL DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Tuesday, 26 March 2019 at 10.30 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Mr B. Provan (Chairman)	Mr P.D. Claussen
Mr I Houlder (Vice-Chairman)	Mrs A. Hay
Mr D Ambrose Smith	Mr R Kerry

In Attendance

Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Christine Marshall	- Executive Director Commercialisation (S151 Officer)
Emma Grima	- Director of Commercial Services (East Cambs District Council)
Nick Khan	- Strategic Director (Suffolk Coastal & Waveney)
Jill Korwin	- Director (Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury)
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Benefits) ARP
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Mark Saunders	- Chief Accountant (FDC)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

1/19 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

a) Discussion of Future Performance Presentation (Minute No. 42/18)

Councillor Ann Hay pointed out that the request she had put forward at the previous meeting had not been included in the new Performance report and she asked again if the figures could be split showing the actual amount collected and the amount of refunds.

b) Minutes

Subject to the above, the Minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2018 were agreed as a correct record.

2/19 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Stephen Edwards and from his substitute Councillor David Bowman.

3/19 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

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4/19 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

5/19 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Stuart Philpot, the Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP, presented the report.

The ARP Performance measures had been reported to the Joint Committee Members using the Balanced Scorecard and Highlight report in the same format for a number of years. Members had seen a sample draft version at the December meeting and Members had asked for a full version of the new Performance report to be brought to this meeting.

The matters of interest were highlighted as set out at section 2 of the report. It was noted that the Council Tax and Business Rates combined reporting highlighted the size of the ARP operation, with total year collection targets amounting to £650m for the whole of the Partnership. In addition to this, the figures for Fraud and Compliance for all Partners combined amounted to over £2m. It was noted that the presentation of data highlighted the figures up to the end of January 2019.

The ARP Strategic Manager (Support Services) said the combined collection for the 7 partners demonstrated clearly the size of the operation.

Red, amber and green (RAG) indicators had been used in respect of the performance information. Referring to the Business rates performance on page 15 of the agenda pack, Members were informed that the table highlighted the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the NNDR Collection Fund against the actual collection.

Attention was then drawn to the Service updates as at January 2019; this information used to be included in the former highlight report. A fuller narrative for each service area had been included. The Annual Billing, shown on page 53 of the agenda pack, had been completed and had gone very well.

Referring to the Corporate Balanced Scorecard – Dashboard, at agenda item 5a, the reason for the collection amounts and budget management being amber for Fenland DC and Waveney DC were due to backdated refunds in respect of successful appeals. These positions would be recovered in due course.

The old style Balanced Scorecard and Highlight report had been appended to the report for comparison to the new style of data reporting and Members were asked which they preferred.

Councillor David Ambrose-Smith asked if a performance rating for customer services could be included in future. He also queried the empty property figure at section 2.2 of the Service Update report. Stuart Philpot confirmed that customer services measures would be added. In response to the latter, it was explained that this figure had been found as a result of a recent review and reviews were carried out every year in May. Paul Corney, the Head of ARP pointed out that an intensive review would be undertaken to maximise the Council Tax base.

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Councillor Houlder asked if all districts were working from the same 'hymn sheet' in respect of discounts for empty properties. Members were informed that each Council had its own empty property discount rate and all information was available on the website.

As from 1 April 2019, Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury Borough Council would be replaced by a single district council and Councillor Houlder thanked the ARP Teams for all their hard work in amalgamating all dwellings as West Suffolk. All Council Tax bills had been delivered and no issues had been raised.

Councillor Ann Hay referred to discretionary powers in respect of discount for Care Leavers as she was aware that Norfolk & Suffolk County Councils were looking to run a discount scheme and asked if ARP would be following suit. Members were informed that the Norfolk & Suffolk scheme was for people who lived within those counties; however, Jo Andrews, the ARP Strategic Manager for Revenues said that she would be happy to develop a scheme for Cambridgeshire and would share this information with Councillor Hay.

The Chairman, Councillor Bruce Provan, drew attention to the figures in respect of account holders in relation to annual billing on page 53 of the agenda pack that did not correspond to the figures highlighted within the graph. It was noted that the figure of 18,000 was just for Council Tax.

Members' attention was then drawn to the recommendation, and it was

RESOLVED that:

- the performance report at Appendix B and C be noted; and
- the new format for ARP Performance Reporting to the Joint Committee be adopted for use from the new financial year 2019-20; subject to customer services performance data being included when required.

(a) Balance Scorecard and Highlight Report

See Minute no. 5/19 above.

(b) ARP Financial Performance

The Executive Director for Commercialisation & S151 Officer for Breckland Council presented the Financial Performance report for the ARP.

The key points were highlighted including the latest forecast under spend against the budget of £72k that would be shared between the partner authorities at the end of the financial year. Section 1.2 of the report highlighted the amount to be paid to each authority based on the approved shares.

Sections 1.3 and 1.4 of the report were also highlighted. Appendix A provided details of the remaining transformation funding that had been set aside in previous years from below budget spend and grant funding.

No questions were asked, and the report and appendices were otherwise noted.

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6/19 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Adrian Mills, the ARP Strategic Manager (Benefits) provided Members with an update on welfare reform and highlighted two areas of change since the publication of the report.

The first area of change was in relation to Universal Credit. The Government had recently announced that Harrogate would be the first to trial the natural migration of 10,000 cases from the old style benefits system to Universal Credit. This pilot scheme would start in July 2019 subject to parliamentary approval.

The second area of change was in respect of the completion date of moving claimants to Universal Credit that had been extended from 2023 to 2024.

Members were reminded that from 1 April 2019, local authorities would no longer be funded by DWP to provide support to help people claim Universal Credit. The Citizens Advice Bureau would be providing that advice funded by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) on a 12 month contract. A further update on this matter would be provided at the next meeting in June.

Attention was then drawn to section 2.2 of the report, Discretionary Housing Payment. Members were informed that ARP had virtually achieved complete spend of the grant that had been funded by DWP - a very good position to be in.

Councillor Claussen raised concerns about Universal Credit particularly after reading section 2.1.5 of the report and felt that this change could result in problems for customers.

Members were assured that the partner Customer Services teams had advised that they would continue to assist customers with their claims that could include signposting people to CAB. This assistance; however, would be on a voluntary basis due to DWP removing funding with Customer Services teams planning to put certain measures in place.

In response to a question in regard to funding, the Strategic Manager (Benefits) explained that the CAB had only been awarded a 12 month contract that would be subject to a review.

Councillor Houlder felt that ARP had a good case history for Universal Credit and for someone having to claim via a new system could cause problems.

Attention was drawn to section 2.1.8 of the report where it stated that funding to smooth the transition to Universal Credit, including an additional two week run of existing DWP benefit, would apply from 2020 to help with the gap to customers' first Universal Credit payment. It was noted that Housing Benefit had provided a two week 'run on' since April 2018. The Strategic Manager (Benefits) stated that ARP would continue to challenge DWP with issues going forward.

Councillor Claussen was anxious about the more difficult cases and the vulnerable people that could be affected and felt that the CAB was not set up to deal with such complicated matters. It was explained that DWP was prepared to listen to all concerns raised by ARP.

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Councillor Kerry felt that applying on-line for some rural areas could be a problem due to lack of broadband signal. He asked if there was going to be any additional resource for dealing with Universal Credit. In response to the first concern, it was noted that Citizen's Advice planned a telephone system to overcome these issues and, in one location, to have a presence in the local library. ARP was continuing to work with Citizen's Advice and Customer Services as the new service commenced.

Paul Corney, Head of ARP mentioned a report that highlighted the amount of people claiming Universal Credit who were going straight into debt, the statistics relating to this matter would be brought to the next meeting in June. It was noted that DWP was now recognising that not everyone was paid monthly.

Councillor Claussen felt that further engagement with local MPs was required to let them know that the expertise, in respect of Universal Credit, lay with ARP. The Head of ARP said that ARP had previously assisted a partner Leader, Chief Executive and MP and could continue to do so if required.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith asked if there would be any budget constraints for ARP with CAB only having a 12 month contract. Members were reminded that ARP did not actually deliver its customer services and it had been identified that partner customer services teams intended to help as noted above. The Strategic Manager (Benefits) would continue to raise matters with DWP as necessary.

Jill Korwin, the Director of Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury DC said that this was about forming local relationships with the CABs and about weaving together our system response. ARP had a lobbying role. Christine Marshall, the Executive Director for Commercialisation & S151 Officer (BDC) felt that ARP needed to feed in any issues very quickly being only a 12 month contract.

Councillor Hay wanted to know if the Council's Customer Service Team continued to provide advice to the CAB unpaid were any records being kept. The Head of ARP thought that this was a really good point which he would raise with the Customer Service Team. The Strategic Manager (Benefits) said that this should already be in place.

The report was otherwise noted.

7/19 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 7)

Councillor Houlder said that he wanted to see a one stop shop for all claims. He also wanted to know if there would be any issues with sharing information with the CAB. The Head of ARP reassured Members that improvements were being made year on year but any issues or concerns should be brought to his attention. In response to the latter, Members were again reassured that ARP would be working closely with the CAB to make the transition of data as smooth as possible. The Strategic Manager (Benefits) explained that customers would have to give their consent to share their data.

8/19 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 11 June 2019 at **10.30am** being held in Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas

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Street, Thetford were noted.

9/19 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 9)

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 & 4 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

10/19 RISK BASED VERIFICATION (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) presented the annual report.

Members were being asked to review and confirm the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support Risk Based Verification (RBV) Policy for 2019/20.

No questions were put forward, and it was:

RESOLVED that the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support Risk Based Verification Policy for 2019-20 for Breckland Council, East Cambridgeshire District Council, Fenland District Council, West Suffolk Council and East Suffolk Council be approved.

Chairman's Announcement

The Chairman announced that this would be his last ARP meeting as he would not be standing for re-election in May and wished the Partnership well for the future.

The meeting closed at 11.30 am

CHAIRMAN