

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, 25 September 2018 at 11.00 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Mr D Ambrose Smith	Mr I Houlder (Vice-Chairman)
Mr P.D. Claussen	Mr R Kerry
Mr S. Edwards	Mr C. Punt (Substitute Member)
Mr M. Buckton (Substitute Member)	

In Attendance

Nick Kahn	- Strategic Director
Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD
Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Alison Chubbock	- Chief Accountant (Deputy Section 151 Officer) (BDC)
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Jill Korwin	- Director (Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury)
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Benefits) ARP
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer
Emma Grima	- Director of Commercial Services (East Cambs District Council)

In the absence of the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, Councillor Ian Houlder chaired the meeting.

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27/18 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2018 were confirmed as a correct record.

The Head of ARP pointed out that ARP Management were working together and would be putting forward a number of recommendations in relation to performance for the December meeting.

28/18 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from the Chairman, Councillor Bruce Provan, Councillor Ann Hay and Homira Javadi, Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer for Waveney & Suffolk Coastal District Council.

Councillor Chris Punt and Councillor Mark Buckton were in attendance as substitutes for the Chairman and Councillor Ann Hay respectively.

Nick Kahn, who would be Homira Javadi's replacement, when she leaves

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later in the year, was also in attendance.

29/18 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

30/18 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

31/18 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

(a) Highlight Report and Balance Scorecard

The Strategic Manager (Support Services) presented the reports and highlighted the following matters:

Benefits and Fraud

All profiled targets for benefits performance were being met and were on course to achieve year end targets.

Fraud and compliance were also on track to exceed the targets for the year. Through the ARP Management arrangement with Norwich City Council, an additional resource had been employed which had been fully funded by Norwich City Council and Norfolk County Council.

Revenues

Performance targets continued to be met in all areas with the exception of non-domestic rates collection for Fenland and Waveney District Councils – included as ‘amber’ on the balance scorecards. The reasons for this target were explained and had been highlighted in the report.

The Further Recovery Team had collected £491K in this financial year exceeding the amount collected this time last year by £213K. In addition to the monies collected a further £1.742m in secured debt had been secured by way of Charging Orders on property owned by the debtor.

Enforcement

The Enforcement Team had collected £11.89m since the Team started; £2.2m had been in this financial year. The service continued to expand and a second external partner would be joining the Enforcement Agency from July 2019.

Council Tax and New Homes Bonus

Local authorities received a payment each year based on the number of domestic properties brought into use (new and previously empty). Each year an exercise was carried out to review all empty properties to maximise the New Homes Bonus. Review forms were sent in May to the owners of each long term empty property to establish if the property remained empty and their intentions. Housing Teams had requested that information be included to assist owners to bring their properties back into use.

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Members were reminded of the 'nudge' techniques that were now being used to encourage customers to keep their payments up to date when the Council tax reminders and final notices were issued. An example of this technique was provided.

Support

The sign up to self-service for Council Tax payers and Housing Benefits recipients across the ARP now exceeded 15,000 and was continuing to rise each month; however, there was still a long way to go to encourage the potential 340,000 ARP customers.

Following on from the successful redesign of the Anglia Revenues website for Business Rates, a new design for Council Tax had been launched. The aim of the new design was to enable the customer to access relevant information etc. in as few 'clicks' as possible.

Changes to Data Protection Requirements

The data collected and processed by the ARP was solely for the purposes of Revenues and Benefits and sharing of this data was only permitted in relation to processing of personal data provided under legal obligation. There were named Data Controllers for each partner of the ARP and for a consistent approach to compliance with the GDPR across the partnership, a bi-monthly meeting was held to discuss any procedural changes. The next meeting would be held in October 2018.

Referring to the New Homes Bonus mentioned above, work with the Housing Teams continued throughout the year to establish how these empty properties could be brought back into use to maximise the Council Tax base return.

Councillor Claussen felt that this work would be accelerated when the new legislation came into effect in a bid to reduce the number of unoccupied properties by charging owners a great deal more in Council Tax.

The Chairman asked about the empty properties run by RSL's. He was frustrated by these landlords as they did not have the urgency to fill these properties. In response, Members were informed that RSL's received an exemption for 6 months and would not be included in the New Homes Bonus category. Councillor Edwards pointed out that this inadequacy had a knock on effect to the homelessness situation. The Chairman announced that St Edmundsbury Council was now charging private landlords Council Tax within a couple of weeks of the property being empty. Councillor Buckton said that Fenland Council had many properties in its District that were hard to let, such as flats, and the Council was looking at funding to build properties that the people preferred. He mentioned the first Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) property that the Council had renovated that had sparked a great deal of interest from the public. Fenland DC was now receiving more reports of empty properties in the area; however, it did not have the necessary resource and felt that the way forward would be to employ CPO Officers.

The Head of ARP explained that the charge for long term empty properties was now going through Parliament and from April 2019 a premium of 100% could be added year on year taking into account certain elements for

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specific exemption cases.

Another question asked was in relation to Non Domestic Rates. The Strategic Manager (Revenues) advised that the discretionary rate relief scheme had been supplied by Government at no cost to the Partnership.

The Strategic Manager for East Suffolk DC mentioned digital transformation and pointed out that savings would be made as more people signed up. He asked if there was an aspirational target for this methodology. The Strategic Manager (Support Services) explained that the initial target was 10% but more staff engagement was required to attract future customers.

Councillor Buckton asked if applications for Universal Credit would be available on-line as he felt that it would make sense to have Council Tax, Benefits and Universal Credit all together on one page. Members were informed that although this was a good idea it was DWP that held all the data for Universal Credit.

Councillor Edwards wanted to know if the ARP was any further forward on single person's discount. The Head of ARP advised that the Strategic Managers of both Benefits and Revenues (ARP) were currently working on a paper and had a meeting arranged with Suffolk DC in November 2018. Members would be kept informed of progress.

Councillor Buckton was very pleased with the information with regard to fraud and asked if the target for recovery would be changed. The Head of ARP advised that a number of initiatives were being considered and the targets were being looked at.

The Balanced Scorecards were then discussed.

Members were informed that all were green except for the collection rates for Fenland District Council and Waveney District Council (mentioned above). Collection was behind for Fenland DC due to refunds in relation to Rateable Value changes; however, provision had been made in the accounts for this situation. In relation to Waveney DC, collection rates were behind target due to a large refund of £600K in respect of backdated mandatory charitable relief for schools.

(b) ARP Financial Performance Report

The Chief Accountant (BDC) presented the report. The report had been based on information as at 31 July 2018; however, figures for the month of August had recently been completed and the values were very similar.

The latest forecast showed an over-spend against a budget of £145K for the whole of ARP (detailed in Appendix A of the report); the main reason for this overspend was due to the efficiency target of £140k not being achieved. It was noted that the increase in Housing Benefit Subsidy grant income had not been included in the report as it had been included in the individual partner authority accounts. Referring to paragraph 1.4 of the report, Members were assured that further efficiencies were expected in future years due to Norwich City Council joining the Enforcement Service and in relation to the on-going Robotics projects. The efficiency target would be reviewed and reset in the budget for next year.

The ARP currently held £171k in reserve to cover any shortfall in the

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efficiency target in any one year and could be utilised if required.

Members' attention was drawn to Appendix A of the report. Appendix A provided further details in relation to the variances, Government funding and the money that remained for future projects.

The report and appendix was otherwise noted.

32/18 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) presented the report and provided Members with a detailed overview of what was happening and what was in the pipeline as far as welfare reform was concerned.

In a response to a concern in relation to DWP customers having to populate their own details on the new Universal Credit digital platform, Members were informed that all concerns were being pushed forward to Parliament as it was felt that DWP should assist their customers through the process.

The Strategic Director (East Suffolk) asked if there would be any provisions for children in care. Members were informed that work was currently being carried out on a Council Tax discount scheme to ensure that anyone leaving care up until the age of 25 would receive 100% discount. The Chairman hoped that any concerns in relation to vulnerable people would be reported back to the Partnership accordingly. Councillor Buckton felt that Universal Credit could result in many people becoming homeless. Councillor Ambrose-Smith wanted to know if ARP was a lone voice in the menagerie of issues with DWP and asked if local MP's should become more involved. The Strategic Manager (Benefits) explained that ARP had a very strong voice in these frustrating times supported by the Local Government Association. In response to the latter, Members were advised that it would be best to wait for the Secretary of State's response prior to any lobbying by MP's.

The report was otherwise noted.

33/18 NORWICH PARTNERSHIP - PARTNERSHIP WORKING THROUGH SECTION 113 AGREEMENT (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of ARP presented the report and highlighted the successes and benefits of sharing best practice with Norwich City Council through a Section 113 Agreement (see paragraphs 1.2 to 1.3.3 of the report).

This continued approach was working so well that approvals were now being sought for Norwich to delegate its Enforcement work to Breckland Council. This work would be passed onto the ARP Enforcement to provide further resilience to the Team on Breckland's behalf.

It was noted that Norwich City Council would provide ARP with a full financial notice if it decided to leave.

Councillor Claussen asked about intellectual property rights. The Head of ARP advised that the Partnership would do so where appropriate. The size of the ARP Partnership was key and would not have the resilience and resource capability to carry out this arrangement without it.

The Strategic Director (East Suffolk) asked if the contribution from Norwich

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towards the cost of the Shared Management Team covered the cost of this arrangement or whether a separate fee was charged. Members were informed that the funding provided by Norfolk County Council was a benefit to the Partnership.

The report was otherwise noted.

34/18 OPTIONS FOR NEW PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT (AGENDA ITEM 8)

This report had been withdrawn.

35/18 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 9)

It was noted that the Service Delivery Plan and Performance Indicators were reviewed and discussed on an annual basis in the month of December.

36/18 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Chairman thought it would be useful for the partners to meet informally as a group in future at 10.00am and the start time of all ARP JC meetings be changed to 10.30am.

These changes were agreed.

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 5 December 2018 at Breckland House in Thetford were noted. The meeting would start at 10.30am following the informal Briefing at 10.00am.

The meeting closed at 12.00 pm

CHAIRMAN