

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 Thursday, 19 March 2015 at 2.00 pm in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Mr D Ambrose Smith (Vice-Chairman)	Mrs S J Mildmay-White
Cllr M Barnard	Mr D A Ray
Mr J Clark	Cllr D Savage
Mr S. Edwards	Mr C Seaton
Ms L Every	Mr M. A. Wassell
Mrs E. M. Jolly (Chairman)	

In Attendance

Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues) ARP
Rob Bridge	- Corporate Director (Fenland)
Arthur Charvonnia	- Strategic Director (W&SC)
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Mark Finch	- Finance Manager (BDC)
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Benefits) ARP
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Richard Quayle	- Director (Support Services) (ECDC)
Liz Watts	- Director (FHDC&SEBC)
Helen McAleer	- Senior Democratic Services Officer (BDC)

1/15 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2/15 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Allen (Waveney), Roman (Forest Heath) and Whiting (Suffolk Coastal).

3/15 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

4/15 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

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5/15 PERFORMANCE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 5)

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(a) Operational Performance

The Head of ARP presented the report and advised that Waveney and Suffolk Coastal would be included in the next performance update.

All indicators were now in line and performance was good. Targets for the next year were open for discussion.

Councillor Mildmay-White asked for views on whether targets should be challenging or comfortable.

The Head of ARP explained that the next year was going to be challenging with the introduction of Welfare Reform and other changes to staff processes, etc. He was therefore recommending that the targets for the next year stayed the same to take into account the expected heavy workload.

Councillor Seaton noted that the targets were set the same across the whole membership and asked if that was achievable. He was advised that due to resilience sharing, work was pooled, and so it was possible to try to maintain a flat level across all Partners.

Councillor Ray asked if the Police and County Councils paid towards the cost of Council Tax collection.

The Corporate Director (Fenland) confirmed that they did not make a direct payment although there was a charge for the cost of collection in the collection fund so that did impact on the amount that the County Councils received. Further clarity was sought on exactly what was charged for. The Head of ARP said that he would look into that.

Paul
Corney

Councillor Ray asked about the results of the Customer Survey and pointed out that only one third of the people contacted found the online process straightforward or easy.

The Head of ARP confirmed that the current website was not really fit for purpose and it was something that he would like to upgrade. He was looking at ways to improve the technology platform and to introduce an Intranet for Partners. The on-line forms for claimants were receiving good feedback from users. It was the more general parts of the website that were causing problems.

Councillor Ray moved on to the Balanced Scorecard and asked why across the board the collection of Business Rates was below target whereas the collection of Council Tax was above.

The Head of ARP explained that there was a built-in measure in the forms against budget requirements. He thought that in cash terms more had been collected and he needed to work out why that was not showing in the graphic. It might be due to the move to 12 monthly instalments which meant that less cash had been collected at the report date. He would provide feedback in the body of the report next time.

Paul
Corney

Councillor Edwards asked about target setting. In view of the current over-

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achievement it seemed wrong to set lower targets for the next year.

The Head of ARP said that it was up to the Members to decide but from an Officer perspective there were challenging times ahead which would need to be resourced. In view of that he was suggesting keeping the same targets for the next year. However, they could be used as a starting point and reviewed during the year if the Partnership was over-performing.

Councillor Edwards proposed that the same targets were maintained but revisited mid year.

RESOLVED that the performance targets for 2015/16 be the same as for 2014/15 and be brought back to the Committee mid-year for review.

The Chairman asked about the website and whether it was worth investing now with all the changes that were coming. The Head of ARP thought that more would be known by the end of June and Councillor Ambrose-Smith asked him to provide full details to the next meeting. Councillor Mildmay-White asked if money was available and was advised that it was not but funding was expected. She asked for the paper to the next Committee to include costings and a proper plan.

The performance report was otherwise noted.

(b) Financial Performance as at 31/01/15

The Finance Manager (Breckland) presented the finance report which showed the savings of £139,000 made from Waveney & Suffolk Coastal District Councils joining the Partnership. There had been a few minor changes providing additional savings due to economies of scale.

The table at the bottom of the report indicated the distribution of savings if that was what Members wanted, otherwise the savings could be retained in the reserve. It was noted that four of the organisations shared the costs of Breckland House, which explained the difference in distribution of costs.

The savings were those made in year and they had been distributed between the Partners the previous year.

Councillor Clark said that Fenland's view was to retain the savings in reserve to meet the costs which might be expected due to the proposals later in the Agenda.

It was confirmed that although the figures were only a forecast they were not expected to change much as most expenses had been factored in and it was close to year end.

Councillor Wassell suggested that unless there was a variance of +/- 10% they should be left in the reserve and utilised for the website upgrade.

Councillor Every asked if there was a plan of future projects or if the reserve just sat in a pot.

It was clarified that the reserve sat in Breckland Council's bank account and was looked after by the ARP. Some projects might need Partner Councils'

approval to spend it, other projects might not. If held in the reserve Members could decide to distribute it at a later date. In previous years it had not always been distributed.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the savings be retained in reserves for the time being; and
- 2) each authority to check what their approval for spend requirements would be.

The report was otherwise noted.

6/15 SFIS AND COUNTER FRAUD (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) presented the report and explained the background to the Single Fraud Investigations Service (SFIS) which was being set up by the DWP and HMRC. Local Authority staff would transfer to the new service in September 2015.

There was an opportunity to use residual funding to set up a non-housing benefit fraud investigation service and it was proposed that the major preceptors should be approached to contribute to that. It was clarified that Waveney District and Suffolk Coastal District Councils already had alternative arrangements provided within a separate partnership in Suffolk and so would not be included in the proposal.

Councillor Ray was concerned that if the existing fraud team transferred to SFIS there would be no expertise left in-house to run the new service. However, the Strategic Manager (Benefits) was confident that staff would prefer to stay where they were and so the new service would be resourced from existing staff.

Councillor Barnard noted that his Council already had their fraud element managed elsewhere. He asked if there would be changes in distribution if they were not part of the scheme.

The Head of ARP advised that the options were set out in the report and the aim was for the new service to be cost neutral. If the whole team was lost any reduction would be shared by five Partners only.

Councillor Ray sought clarification of the table on page 43. It was explained that the information had been taken from a variety of national organisations' indicators and the lower 10% of their predictions had been used to provide the realistic figure.

The Chairman asked what authority would be needed to set up such a service and it was confirmed that approval would be needed from each of the five Partner Authorities involved.

Members moved on to discuss the proposed contribution by major preceptors. It was agreed that the sooner a decision could be made the better it would be for the affected staff, therefore it was suggested that the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) be authorised to negotiate a contribution from them and then present a report for approval by each Partner Council as required.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the report be noted;
- 2) authority be delegated to the OIB to negotiate a contribution from the major preceptors; and
- 3) authority be delegated to the OIB to retain a permanent Counter Fraud Team subject to approval where necessary from the Partner Councils of the ARP.

7/15 ENFORCEMENT AGENCY UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of ARP presented the report and confirmed that all was progressing well despite the tight timescale. The tender process was almost complete and the contract would be signed the following week and the new system would be implemented over six weeks starting in April. Jobs had been evaluated and the advertisement for administration staff was ready.

The enforcement process was made up of two stages. Stage one would be trying to get customers to set up a payment arrangement and would be handled by admin staff. Stage two would need the recruitment of two to three enforcement officers who would actually visit premises and, as a last resort, take goods.

It was proposed that the service would be known as the ARP Enforcement Agency (rather than taking the title of each individual Council).

The first cases would be trialled in small batches by the end of May and would then proceed to bigger batches from July.

Councillor Savage asked if the new service would be based on the same fee charges and she was advised that the fees were statutory so they would remain the same as currently. At the moment the Partnership used two bailiff services (one for initial visits and another for follow-up visits) although it only received one fee. It was the intention to continue to use a separate bailiff service to give added resilience.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith asked about the supplier demonstrations. Two systems had been looked at. One provided a 'Rolls Royce' service but was very expensive. The other system did everything that was needed and had been chosen. The biggest difference between the two was that the chosen system did not work well in the field so paper would still have to be used. However it was an adequate system.

The report was noted.

8/15 ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Head of ARP presented the report.

Currently two document management systems were used which meant that resilience sharing across authorities was restricted. A business case for a shared Electronic Document Management System had therefore been prepared. It was anticipated that the benefits of one centralised system would provide staff savings and bring a financial return after three years.

Delegated authority was requested for the Operational Improvement Board to

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investigate the available systems and procure a shared document management system for all seven Partners.

Councillor Mildmay-White asked where the £105,000 needed for the purchase would come from. She was advised that the authorities had already received some New Burdens funding. Set-up costs were held, pending approval.

Councillor Ray asked if there were only two systems available and it was noted that Civica and Northgate were the two market leaders but it might be necessary to undertake a full procurement exercise, depending on advice to be received from the legal and procurement teams.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the report be noted;
- 2) Option 1 in the business case, to move all Councils to one document imaging system, be approved; and
- 3) authority be delegated to the OIB to procure a shared document management system in accordance with the business case.

9/15 UNIVERSAL CREDIT (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Chairman had attended a conference on Universal Credit in London and she gave Members a verbal update on that and on a pre-meeting with Lord Freud beforehand.

The aim of Universal Credit was to provide greater fairness and to replace six existing benefits and credits with one monthly payment, in arrears, into a bank account. It would be an easier and more flexible system, able to respond to change more quickly than the existing systems. However, it did not include the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Universal Credit was being introduced in stages and from February 2015 that had been accelerated for delivery to new, single claimants only. In Breckland it was expected to involve about 1000 claimants between April and December. 95% of those should be able to self-serve.

Councils were required to sign a Partnership Agreement with the DWP and meetings were being held with the DWP and the BDC/ARP legal team to ensure it was a robust agreement which would include the cost of the personal budgeting system as some people would need support to make a claim. Prior to go-live there would also be a Data Sharing Agreement.

Negotiations were being carried out with third parties to provide personal budgeting support. In time the DWP estimated that it would take about two hours per person for simple claims and six hours per person for more complex cases. There were still a lot of things not yet resolved.

Some Councils that had taken part in the pilot schemes had been surprised at how well it was working. One outcome was that Local Authorities were proving more successful at helping people to find jobs than the Job Centres. In future Job Centres would co-locate with Councils to provide a One Stop Shop.

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The Corporate Director (Fenland) advised that he had attended a meeting with DWP to discuss the Admin Grant and the timing of Universal Credit. He had been advised that there would be a 10% reduction in the Admin Grant from 2016/17 on top of the 10% reduction already made.

Councillor Mildmay-White asked who was delivering Personal Budgeting Advice for other Councils and was advised that most were using Party Providers such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, and that the Partnership may need to look at providing the service itself at some stage.

The Director (Support Services)(ECDC) had recently moved from Cumbria where Universal Credit had already been rolled out. They had found it a lot simpler than expected. There were three aspects: provide support – as a Council or outsourced; provide On-Line access; and provide Personal Budgeting Support. Staff training was important and the use of a debt advice service was advised for more complex cases.

10/15 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Head of ARP thought there was a case for developing a brochure to describe what the ARP was – giving its background, etc. It could be used in a lot of ways: as a trading route; on the website; and with regard to Universal Credit it could be used to promote the opportunity to suggest to the DWP that the ARP could provide a single point of contact, local processing centre.

The document would be ready to present to the ARP after Easter to test interest in it and if it was supported it should be possible to produce it for as little as a few hundred pounds per authority from the existing budget.

The Chairman thought it was an excellent idea. The Partnership was at a crossroads at the start of a new era. If the support centres were located a long way away it was likely that workload would be lost. New platforms were needed and she wholeheartedly supported the proposal.

11/15 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The arrangements for the next meeting at 2pm on 10 June 2015 in the Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, Thetford were noted.

12/15 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 12)

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involved the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

13/15 STRATEGIC REVIEW (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Corporate Director (Fenland) presented the report which the Chairman had asked Officers to prepare.

Attention was drawn to the table of ten recommendations made by Activist and to the progress made against each. Most of the recommendations had been actioned and completed.

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With regard to the final recommendation on the delivery model there had been valuable feedback received from Members at the workshop held before the December meeting when it had been agreed to stick with what was working well.

Members discussed the existing Trading Arm and the opportunity to reinvigorate that and to use it to gain income. More work would be done on that and on how much capital would be needed.

RESOLVED to agree the recommendations in the report at paragraphs 4.13 to 4.18.

14/15 RISK BASED VERIFICATION (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits)(ARP) asked the Joint Committee to approve the Risk Based Verification Policy without any changes. It would be reviewed annually.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the report be noted; and
- 2) the review of the Housing Benefit Risk Based Verification Policy for 2013/14 and 2014/15 for Breckland Council, East Cambridgeshire District Council, Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council be approved.

The meeting closed at 3.45 pm

CHAIRMAN