

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Benefits performance continues to meet profiled targets and is on course to achieve year end targets, except Council Tax Support cases at Waveney, which is forecast to miss target due to Universal Credit issues.

As previously reported, Universal Credit delays, increased customer contact and evidence gather to determine Local Council Tax Support entitlements has impacted processing at Waveney; these matters have been raised locally and nationally through the UC/LA Steering group attended by the Strategic Manager (Benefits), as well as by the Council Leader with the MP and DWP leading to a meeting with the UC Minister.

With regard to target setting for 2017/18, the following table details current targets, current performance and proposes maintaining the current targets:

Performance measure	2016/17 target	2016/17 performance	Proposed 2017/18 target
Ben 1: average days to process Council Tax Reduction new claims & changes	8 days	Within target to 10* days *Waveney only	8 days
BEN 2: average days to process Housing Benefits new claims & changes	8 days	Within target	8 days
Local Authority error overpayments	<0.35%	Within target	<0.35%

Fraud and compliance performance

Following the transfer of Housing Benefit fraud to the DWP on the 1 September 2015, the team have been tasked, in accordance with the Business Case approved by Joint Committee, to identify and prevent fraud leading to an increase in Council Tax income in the following areas:

- Local Council Tax Support
- Single Person Discount
- Council Tax & Non Domestic Rates
- Tenancy fraud

Continued funding has been secured from Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils to support the review of Single Person Discounts and negotiations are taking place to secure funding from Cambridgeshire for future years.

Furthermore, the team are working with Housing Teams and Housing Associations to tackle Right to buy and subletting abuse and is having success in this area.

The table below records the excellent work of the team, on track to exceed targets for the year.

Description of financial saving	2016/17 target	Performance 1.4.16- 31.12.16
	Single Person Discount fraud	500,000
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	174,072
Tenancy fraud	400,000	432,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	250,000	232,593
Total financial savings	1,300,000	1,253,608

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) continues to participate in a national DWP/LA Housing Benefit Operational Steering Group to have input into shaping and influencing current and proposed operational matters. ARP challenged DWP plans to introduce expansion of data exchange to LAs when the initial testing had not fully proved concept; when implementation downtime was not acceptable to business as usual and importantly proposed to introduce significant change during the busy annual billing and uprating period. DWP revised their plans including further pilot testing and have delayed implementation until after the annual billing exercise. Furthermore, ARP continues to take a lead role influencing and shaping national procedures regarding DWP working practices for the investigation of Housing Benefit.

Revenues

Performance continues to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Suffolk Coastal District Council, Breckland Council & Fenland District Council. The reason behind the drop in NNDR collection for Suffolk Coastal was reported at previous Joint Committees and is due to a large back dated reduction in Rateable Value for one property of £1.03M, resulting in a refund of £2,376,811 paid in April 2016. Breckland and Fenland District Council's targets have also not been met due to large backdated appeals on purpose built Doctors surgeries for which provision has been made in the accounts.

The funding secured from Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire County Councils has enabled the further recovery work to continue this financial year. Suffolk and Norfolk County Council have agreed to continue this funding and negotiations will continue with Cambridgeshire County Council. The further recovery team have collected £462,465.11 in this financial year which includes £208,068.55 in respect of cases raised this year.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well, having collected £4.5 Million since the team started of which £3.2 Million has been in this financial year. Unfortunately having appointed a further Certificated Enforcement Agent to the team another has resigned. Therefore there are currently 4 Enforcement Agents, out of a full complement of 5, carrying out visits. We are currently advertising

for a fifth Enforcement Agent. The collection is still broadly in line with the previous private sector bailiffs although monies collected by the in-house team will be allocated to fees first whereas in the case of external agents monies are apportioned between the debt and fees. We continue to meet the cost of running the service through fees collection and we are on target to produce a surplus in this financial year approaching £500k.

Single discount applications continue to be checked by the compliance team in order to prevent discounts being granted incorrectly and avoiding the issue of trying to collect amounts of Council Tax retrospectively. An annual review will also be carried out.

An NNDR revaluation is taking place with effect from 1 April 2017 with an antecedent date of 1 April 2015. The first draft of the new Valuation List was available on 30 September 2016 with an updated version on 31 December 2016. The team have ensured all the NNDR databases have been updated with the new rateable values and balanced in readiness for the annual billing exercise. Nationally the total rateable value has increased and consequently the multiplier will reduce as the overall effect of a revaluation is neutralised. The multiplier has been confirmed at 47.9p or 46.6p for small businesses compared to the current financial year of 49.7p and 48.4p respectively.

The following changes have also been made:-

- Small business rates relief has been extended. Ratepayers with only one property will receive 100% relief where their rateable value is up to £12,000 RV and tapered relief up to £15,000 RV.
- Ratepayers who have a rateable value below £51,000 will have their bill based on the small multiplier.
- There will also be a transitional relief scheme which will cushion the impact of large rate increases. This will be a self-funding scheme and consequently properties seeing a large reduction will have a premium applied to their account.
- Mandatory Rural rate relief has also been increased from 50% to 100%.
- Government is funding rate relief of £1,500 for local newspaper offices.
- The minimum RV for charging Empty Property Rates has been increased from £2,600 to £2,900.
- Explanatory notes which have previously been sent with the business rates bills can now be published on the internet instead.

In the budget on 8 March 2017 the Chancellor announced further help for small businesses, public houses and additional funding for a discretionary relief scheme to help businesses facing the steepest increases. The Government has given initial guidance on the first of these and is currently consulting on the operation of the other two.

Support

Annual Billing 2017-18

As part of the Digital Transformation project, using “eye tracking” and “nudge” techniques a redesign of both the front and back of the Council Tax Bills has taken place. This has been undertaken by the System Admin team resulting in all partners of the Anglia Revenues Partnership able to share the

same design. The eye tracking enables the layout of the bill design to maximise the effectiveness of getting the correct information to the customer.

The System Admin team and the Quality Assurance team have performed a full year end testing process which includes a Business Rates revaluation and a new parish in Waveney affecting 27,000 properties in Lowestoft and Oulton Broad. With over 360,000 Council Tax bills, Business Rates and Benefits notifications being produced, it is vital for our external mailers to have the full output in order to identify any potential problems that could be encountered when carried out in Live.

The programme of annual billing is from February 21st with planned completion by mid-March and will include two weekends of work for the system admin team. At all times, as last year, we will endeavour to keep at least three partners data available to work on through the whole process, keeping all staff productive during this time and able to work on any of the available databases.

ICT upgrade

Following the completion of a major CAPITA system upgrade (RHEL6) for Breckland DC, Forest Heath DC, St Edmundsbury DC, East Cambs DC, Waveney DC and Suffolk Coastal DC, the System Admin Team, in conjunction with ICT, have upgraded the Fenland DC database along with a migration from a Windows platform to a Linux platform that was completed during December. This has now resulted in all seven databases using the same structure enabling consistent working practices across all seven partners' Revenues and Benefits Data.

E-billing and Landlord online account

As part of the preparation for channel shift, every customer of the partner councils of the ARP has the ability to sign up to view their Council Tax, Business Rates, Benefits payments and E-billing via the ARP Website. For each sign up, the postal cost for billing to the customer will be eliminated with all new bills and notifications available online. As with all online portals, details can be accessed twenty four hours a day, seven days a week and it is also anticipated the use of the online account will reduce the number of customer contacts.

Landlords are also able to access all payments made direct to them via this facility, with payments information available as soon as the payment file has been produced by the system giving advance notification of payment details. Landlords can also view any correspondence from Housing Benefits, electronically.