

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL
WEST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

**Held on Tuesday, 17 December 2019 at 11.00 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT**

PRESENT

Mrs S. Broughton (Chairman)	Mr P.D. Claussen (Substitute Member)
Mr D Ambrose Smith	Mrs K. French (Substitute Member)
Mr M. Cook	

In Attendance

Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD
Alison Chubbock	- Chief Accountant (Deputy Section 151 Officer) (BDC)
Tom Darling-Fernley	- Programme Manager (ARP).
Nick Khan	- Strategic Director (East Suffolk)
Rachael Mann	- Assistant Director (Resources & Performance)
Siobhan Martin	- Head of Internal Audit
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Ian Smith	- Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

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35/19 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

(a) 11 June 2019

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2019 were agreed as a correct record.

(b) 17 September 2019 - Notes

The Notes of the meeting held on 17 September 2019 were noted.

36/19 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cowen and J French. Substitutes in attendance were Councillors Claussen and K French.

Apologies were also received from Paul Corney and Peter Catchpole.

37/19 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

38/19 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None declared.

39/19 GOVERNANCE AND REPORTING ARRANGEMENTS RELATING TO INTERNAL AUDIT (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Siobhan Martin, the Head of Internal Audit (East Suffolk Council) provided Members with a detailed overview of the role of the internal audit, and provided clarity in respect of the responsibilities of the Operational Improvement Board and the Joint Committee in relation to the reporting arrangements provided by Internal Audit.

The Heads of Internal Audit at East Suffolk, Fenland and West Suffolk jointly provided the Internal Audit Service to the five partner councils and worked collaboratively when planning work to ensure efficient and effective reviews took place to support all stake holders.

The reporting arrangements were explained.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith asked about the external audit provision. Members were informed that the relationship between internal and external audit complimented each other. The East of England used Ernst & Young LLP and regular meetings were held. The S151 Officers and the Heads of Paid Service also had regular briefings with the External Auditors.

The report was otherwise noted.

40/19 REVIEW OF THE ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP CONSTITUTION (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Rachel Mann, the Assistant Director (Resources & Performance) for West Suffolk Council presented the report.

The report asked Members and recommended to each partner Authority to consider and approve the revised Partnership Agreement to have effect from the 1 April 2019.

The current Agreement had been in force for a number of years and many changes/updates to the document had been made.

The revised Agreement had been considered by each Partner's Legal, Financial and Audit Teams to reflect the Councils merging in East and West Suffolk. A further update had also been requested at the 17 September 2019 Joint Committee meeting in relation to the quoracy of the Committee. The quoracy had been amended to four Members unless the Chair in consultation with the Joint Committee felt that it would be appropriate for all five Members (or their substitute) to be present. In this situation, the item would be deferred until the next meeting.

It was:

RESOLVED that the revised Partnership Agreement be approved – to have effect from 1st April 2019; and

RECOMMEND to each Partner Authority's Cabinet that:

1. the revised Agreement be approved; and
2. subject to the approval from each Partner Authority the revised Agreement be signed and sealed by each Council.

41/19 PERFORMANCE REPORT AND SERVICE UPDATES (AGENDA ITEM 7)

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

Members were informed that all Partner Councils combined for 2019/20 for Business Rates and Council Tax collection were on target and the target for fraud and compliance for the year had been exceeded.

Breckland's Council Tax collection was behind target by £230,173 due to the high level of refunds for this year, £609k compared to £475k at this point last year – an increase of £134k which had reduced collection.. Breckland also had an increase in the amount of pre-payments for the current financial year and the first summons for non-payment had been delayed one month by the Court which would have an effect. The situation was being closely monitored.

Members were informed that whilst the Housing Benefit performance indicator had been exceeded and overachieved, this had been due to the downtime associated with the merger of East Suffolk and West Suffolk systems.

Referring to East Suffolk Council Business Rates, the collection rates were behind target for the current financial year by £347k. There had been £3.9m of backdated refunds as a result of reductions in rateable value.

As far as enforcement was concerned, the Enforcement Team continued to perform well and had collected almost £19m. From July 2019, the Team had been taking cases from Norwich City Council with some good results.

The Anglia Revenues website design had been enhanced to be more transactional and as straight forward as possible for customers and was now showing a 10% increase in usage for Council Tax, Business Rates, Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Reduction Schemes.

The Chairman mentioned the Better Customer Journeys Programme and asked if the website was going to be further improved. Members were informed that ARP was currently working with Capita to make such improvements. All partner Councils would need to be involved to make sure that the product was fit for purpose and make it an easier journey for the customer.

Adrian Mills, the Strategic Manager for Billing & Benefits reported that Capita had now released version 2 of the address form which was in test to check enhancements that had been identified and implemented.

The Performance Report and Service updates were otherwise noted.

42/19 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (AGENDA ITEM 8)

Alison Chubbock, the Chief Accountant for Breckland Council presented the report.

The report highlighted the full year financial information against the budget for ARP. The latest forecast at this stage of the year showed a small over spend of £34k (0.4%) for the whole of ARP.

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The funding held in the ICT Reserve had now started to be spent and income from Norwich City's enforcement cases was now starting to come through and would increase accordingly.

The report recommended that the end of year variance be distributed between the partner authorities in the approved shares. The shares for each partner had been highlighted on page 110 of the agenda pack.

The Chairman asked what had caused the over spend. In response, the Chief Accountant advised that this had been due to the employment of agency staff but was hopeful that most of it would be 'clawed' back.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith mentioned the comments made on page 113 in relation to the reason behind the over spend. Members were informed that this was one of the difficulties caused by setting the budget early.

RESOLVED that:

1. the report and appendix be noted; and
2. the final full year variance at 31 March 2020 be shared between the partner authorities in the approved shares.

43/19 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 9)

Adrian Mills the ARP Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) presented the report.

The Universal Credit section at paragraph 2.2.3 of the report was highlighted. DWP had announced a £10m Universal Credit Transition Fund to help vulnerable people but funding application details were not yet available.

The outcome of the migration trial at Harrogate Job Centre was still awaited.

Referring to the Welfare Benefit Up-rating April 2020 new announcement at paragraph 3 of the report, Members were informed that the benefit rates would be increased from April 2020 by 1.7%, the State Pension would also be raised by 3.9%.

The Chairman asked if the CAB and what other charities would be entitled to a share of the £10m Universal Credit Transition Fund. In response, the ARP Strategic Manager advised that the application process had not been notified but it was likely CAB and charities such as Food Banks as well as Local Authorities could apply.

Councillor Claussen asked how much funding it would mean for ARP. Members were informed that this would all be subject to how it was divided up; there were approximately 300 Councils, so small amounts locally, through the LGA, the Government could be lobbied to increase the pot.

The report was otherwise noted.

44/19 ARP STRATEGY REFRESH (AGENDA ITEM 10)

Following introductions, Tom Darling Fernley, the new Programme Manager presented his report.

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Members were provided with a detailed overview of the work involved to develop coherent annual service delivery plans, change delivery plans and a target operating model that had led to a review of the Partnership's strategic priorities that now included benefits, customer needs and development of staff.

A strategy had been developed along with a Service Plan, details of the whole process that was followed could be found at Appendix C of the report.

The strategic themes at section 3.2.3 of the report were highlighted.

The Chairman was pleased to note that 'customers' were one of the top priorities.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith was concerned that none of the themes/priorities included the Department of Work & Pensions. Members were informed that DWP would come within 'relationships'.

Referring to Appendix D, Councillor Claussen had noticed that under 'colleagues' agile working was mentioned that would, in his opinion, be a complete culture shift and asked where ARP was at in that journey. The Strategic Manager (Support Services) explained that this would mean being able to work across all 4 sites and would be helpful for homeworking too. It was noted that this agile approach included management.

Councillor Claussen asked if this agile working would free up space at Breckland House. Members were informed that the building would not be overloaded – there was desk space and hot desking would be available.

Councillor Cook asked where ARP was with its 'digital by default' service. The Programme Manager advised that 'digital by default' had the potential to free up a large amount of full-time posts as it would promote more self-service.

In response to a question about timelines, Members were informed that Universal Credit automation was on track to be delivered by April/May 2020. The software was being tested and more elements could be added, subject to system capability.

RESOLVED that the mission, strategic themes and vision as set in the report and in Appendix D be approved.

45/19 THE ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP (ARP) SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN (AGENDA ITEM 11)

In the absence of Paul Corney, the Head of ARP, Jo Andrews, the Strategic Manager for Revenues presented the report.

In accordance with the ARP Agreement a revised Service Delivery plan should be agreed by the Joint Committee by the end of December each year.

The last Service Delivery Plan had been agreed in December 2018 and the report provided Members with the progress/achievements that had been made since then (see section 2.1 of the report). One improvement had been on call handling and performance had increased significantly in comparison to

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the previous year due to new phone technology being introduced in March 2019. Another success had been the introduction of a generic role called a Council Tax Billing Officer; a more flexible resource that could be moved from Council Tax Support cases to billing as the workload demands.

The next Service Delivery Plan would incorporate the strategic themes for all partner Councils as discussed in the previous report.

The Risk Register that had been inadvertently omitted from the Agenda and had been circulated at the start of the meeting was discussed. The one 'red' risk relating to income retained for Business Rates and Council tax was explained. It was noted that the Court Hearing for the NHS claim had been held last month and although the outcome had been successful (the NHS was not classed as a charity); Appeals from hospitals could follow.

There was some discussion on historical outstanding Appeals.

The Chairman was disappointed to note the high staff turnover and the lack of basic training. Members were informed that a shorter training programme was now in place to enable staff to become operational sooner. The high staff turnover was in respect of all the temporary posts.

RESOLVED that:

- the progress on respect of the December 2018 Service Delivery Plan be noted; and
- the revised Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register be approved.

46/19 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE PARTNERSHIP BUDGET (AGENDA ITEM 12)

Alison Chubbock, the Chief Accountant for Breckland Council presented the 2020/21 budget for the whole of the Partnership.

It was explained that each partnership Council prepared and set its own budget.

Approval was now sought from the Joint Committee Members for the ARP budgets to be incorporated into the 5 Partners' individual budgets for their own budget setting.

The budgets had been set using the same principles as previous years and included an efficiency target of £120k to be achieved from 2021-22 onwards.

Benefits payments and subsidies, court fee income and other grants specific to the individual authorities had not been included within the partnership budgets as these were the direct responsibility of the individual authorities.

The overall budget showed an increase of £450k compared to 2019-20. The reasons for this were explained at section 1.5 of the report.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith pointed out that the budget had increased overall by 4.8%. He then highlighted the increase to the budget for each Partner Council. For East Cambridgeshire this would mean an increase of 6.3% which was more than he was willing to support; however, he had been very encouraged by what he had heard.

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The Chief Accountant explained that for some Councils, the increases were higher than others but this was due to how the Partnership contributions had been split. Another reason for East Cambs percentage increase had been due to the drop in its enforcement cases.

Councillor Claussen reminded Members that East Cambs budget included a zero increase to its Council Tax.

The recommendation was proposed and seconded, and following a vote, 4 in favour and 1 against, it was:

RESOLVED that the Partnership budget for 2020-21 at Appendix A of the report be approved.

47/19 JOINT COMMITTEE ARP BROCHURE (AGENDA ITEM 13)

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

It was noted that all suggestions provided at the last meeting had been incorporated into the brochure and Members were thanked for providing their photographs.

Section 5 of the report in respect of costs was highlighted and it was further noted that only 250 copies of the brochure would be printed.

The ARP brochure would be reviewed on a regular basis; there would be an on-line version in a PDF format as well as a link.

Councillor Cook was pleased with the brochure and asked for the link to be sent round to Members again.

RESOLVED that:

1. the new ARP Brochure be adopted for use by the Anglia Revenues Partnership to provide information to Members, new Joint Committee Members and new staff working as part of the ARP; and
2. the December version of the ARP Brochure be approved.

48/19 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 14)

Nothing to report.

49/19 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 15)

The arrangements for the next meeting on 24 March 2020 at 11am in Level 5 meeting room, Thetford were noted.

It was further noted that the pre-briefing for Members of the Joint Committee would commence at 10am.

The meeting closed at 12.10 pm

CHAIRMAN