

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, 27 March 2018 at 10.00 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

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

In Attendance

Brendan Arnold	- Chief Finance Officer and Corporate Director (Fenland)
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
Simon Taylor	- Finance Manager (Compliance) and Deputy S151 Officer (Suffolk Coastal)
Ian Smith	- Principal Accountant (East Cambs)

1/18 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2017 were agreed as a correct record.

2/18 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Homira Javadi, Christine Marshall and Emma Grima.

The following Officers were in attendance as their substitutes: Simon Taylor, Alison Chubbock and Ian Smith.

3/18 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

4/18 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

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5/18 **ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)
(AGENDA ITEM 5)**

(a) Highlight report and Balanced scorecard

The Head of ARP presented the report.

Benefits Performance

Housing Benefits performance was close to meet the year-end targets; however, this was not the case for all the Councils. Four of the Councils as shown on the balance scorecard, the target for processing of Council Tax support cases was not likely to be met and it was expected that the final year end figure for these Councils would be 9 days against a target of 8 days. Members were reassured; however, that going into 2018/19 appropriate measures had been put in place in relation to resources, for the peak periods, and should therefore level the performance.

Fraud & Compliance Performance

Targets were being achieved. During the year the Team had identified several dwellings and businesses either not registered not having had an undeclared change in use that had led to increased charges - in some cases significant higher retrospective charges. Finding cases that should be registered would be ongoing but in time it would reduce.

Revenues

Performance targets continued to be met in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Fenland, Waveney, Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury Councils due to the significant amount of refunds as a result of successful appeals by ratepayers against their rateable values. The Finance Teams were aware.

Support Services

This year's annual billing had gone very well and had been the smoothest year thus far. All bills had been sent out on time and no issues had been raised.

Digital Transformation and Self-Service

The 2018 Annual Billing included in excess of 10,000 Council Tax payers and Housing Benefit recipients opting entirely to receive their bills and notifications electronically thus saving postage and all could access copy of their bills etc on-line. The new on-line forms being designed was going well but there had been issues with provider. The Team continued to work with the provider to hopefully resolve these issues.

Councillor Hay asked a question in relation to benefits processing and wanted to know how this could improve. Members were informed that this had been due to staff shortages but this was no longer the case and therefore should now improve.

In response to a further question in relation to Council Tax correspondence and the reason why the trend had reversed in December, Members were

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informed that work was ongoing with the Operational Improvement Board to review the staff resource in the Council Tax section. There had been a similar trend in Housing Benefit with high volumes of correspondence and telephone calls in the first couple of months and the OIB was looking at better ways to manage this busy time period.

Councillor Claussen wanted to know how ARP's targets compared nationally. In response, Members were informed that at this point in time, new claims took approximately 18-20 days and a change in circumstances around 5 days. This compared to the national average of 22 days and 9 days. The OIB was going to re-visit some of these performance targets.

Councillor Edwards asked for the full years out-turn performance information to be sent to Members when available.

ACTION: Circulate year end performance information to all ARP JC Members.

(b) Finance report

The Chief Accountant for Breckland Council presented the report.

It was explained that as of 31 January 2018 the committed Transformation Funding stood at £180,529 and if all the identified expenditure went through as planned by the end of 2018/19 there would be £47,928 remaining for future projects.

ACTION – move the £47k to future years.

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

The ARP Strategic Manager (Benefits) presented the report.

Universal Credit (UC)

Further Government Budget announcements included the following improvements:

- Live Service closure 1st January 2018
- Removal of seven waiting days prior to claim start date from 14th February 2018
- Claims from 14th February 2018 would now usually be paid in one month and seven days rather than one month and 14 days
- Claimants could request a 100% advance payment, increased from 50% from the 14th February 2018
- Temporary accommodation cases to be assessed in Housing Benefit from April 2018. Whilst this applied to new claims, existing cases would only migrate to Housing Benefit following specified change of events
- An extra two weeks Housing Benefit to be automatically awarded from April 2018 when Universal Credit was claimed
- Improvements to process for private landlords to request an alternative payment arrangement (direct payment to the landlord).

Many of the aforementioned improvements/enhancements would come into force very soon and there still remained a number of issues in relation to how

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these would be administered.

The programme to migrate existing Housing Benefit customers had been delayed by 12 months and would now commence in July 2019 with a corresponding delayed completion date of March 2022. Conversations were on-going with Local Housing Authorities and DWP in relation to this schedule.

Councillor Houlder referred to the alternative payment arrangement for private landlords and asked if this was going to be a major issue. It was noted that DWP did not release this date and ARP did not have access to it. However, with the budget announcements in December 2017, it was much easier for landlords to request a direct payment than it was before. Landlords could apply for direct payment of the housing element of Universal Credit to themselves. These improvements would ultimately have a positive effect on arrears and homelessness.

Social Rented Sector Rent Restrictions

Government had responded to consultation on funding for supported housing in which it had indicated it would not implement Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates in social housing; further proposals included:

- Short-term supported accommodation to be funded via grant to Upper Tier Councils - no longer funded through Housing Benefit. Concerns remain as to how this would operate in practice.
- Long-term supported accommodation would be funded as it was now - via the welfare system.
- A new 'Sheltered rent' would be introduced – for which gross eligible rent (inclusive of service charges) would be regulated by the social housing regulator. Assistance in this type of accommodation would continue to be paid via the welfare system. 'Sheltered rent' would be subject to a cap, the calculation of which maintained a link to formula rent.
- A local strategic plan would be required by Upper Tier Councils, setting out how funding would be used to meet identified local need.
- A National Statement of Expectation for supported housing funding would be introduced.
- April 2020 had been indicated as the implementation date.

Referring to the government's approach to supported accommodation (i.e. hostels) ARP was waiting to see how this looked and there could be grants available to upper tier councils. DWP needed to ensure that it was capturing the correct data.

The Chairman was pleased to announce that Adrian Mills, the ARP Strategic Manager (Benefits) had been the recipient of a silver award in the iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards in the Reinventing Local Services Category. In this particular category there had been 39 entries with just 3 entries shortlisted.

The report was otherwise noted.

7/18 ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP RISK REGISTER (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of ARP presented the report.

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At the Joint Committee in June 2014 it had been agreed that Members would be updated every six months on the risk assurance so that the greatest risks to the organisation could be highlighted.

A number of high risks remained since the last report but a process of mitigation and monitoring was in place to eliminate some of these risks.

The risk surrounding income from business rates had reduced but still remained in relation to subsequent appeals that could be submitted. The Finance Team had made provision for this.

In respect of Universal Credit, there was a danger that this would reduce over the coming years but until further information from the Government was received this would remain as a risk on the Risk Register.

The risk in relation to business continuity had risen due to the recent cyber-attacks. West Suffolk IT had already updated all software but this was a matter that had to be monitored continually.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and the Risk Assurance Register be agreed.

8/18 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 8)

None.

9/18 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 26 June 2018 at 10.00am, Level 5, Thetford were noted.

10/18 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 10)

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 items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 & 4 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

11/18 RISK BASED VERIFICATION (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) ARP presented the report.

The Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) requires Councils to review their Risk Based Verification Policies annually and requires Members to approve the continuance or revision of their Policy.

In March 2017, the Joint Committee approved expanding the Risk Based Verification Policy to include changes of circumstances as well as new claims; however, due to the change in the forms and the continuous work with the provider (mentioned earlier in the meeting) it was anticipated that this functionality would be introduced in the Spring 2018.

RESOLVED that:

- to note that the Policy remains unchanged in 2017/18

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- the Housing Benefit Risk Based Verification Policy for 2018/19 for Breckland Council, East Cambridgeshire District Council, Fenland District Council, Forest Heath District Council, St Edmundsbury Borough Council, Suffolk Coastal District Council and Waveney District Council be approved.

12/18 ARP BRIEFING NOTE (AGENDA ITEM 12)

Jill Korwin, Director of Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury District Councils presented the report that proposed to create two new district-level councils for West Suffolk and East Suffolk. Members were provided with a detailed overview of the proposals and the processes being put in place in relation to the procurement of an additional resource.

A more detailed report would be discussed at the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) meeting in April and a further report would be provided at the next Joint Committee meeting in June 2018.

Councillor Claussen raised concern about possible IT risks. Members were assured that this was the reason for the additional resource.

The report was otherwise noted.

Action – further update to be brought to the next JC meeting in June.

13/18 FUTURE OF ARP TRADING LIMITED (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Chief Finance Officer & Corporate Director for Fenland District Council presented the report.

The options available to Members were explained and the recommendation was highlighted.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith felt that the governance should be addressed prior to the revival of the Company. Members were informed that legal advice was awaited in terms of process.

It was agreed that a Shareholders Advisory Group meeting would be convened immediately following the ARPJC meeting.

RESOLVED that Option B of the report be adopted.

14/18 ARP TRADING LTD, FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The Chief Accountant presented the report.

The report highlighted that there would be a small financial impact to each of the Partner Authorities now that the recommendation at agenda item 13 had been adopted; however, this was more than offset by the saving for each partner from the ARP Partnership budget.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 10.50 am

CHAIRMAN