

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
FOREST HEATH DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Thursday, 11 September 2014 at 2.00 pm in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24
1BT

PRESENT

Mr D Ambrose Smith (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)	Mrs S J Mildmay-White
Mr J Clark	Mr D A Ray
Mr S. Edwards	Mr N Roman
Ms L Every	Mr C Seaton
Mrs E. M. Jolly	Mr M. A. Wassell

In Attendance

Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Rob Bridge	- Corporate Director Fenland
Jo Brooks	- Assistant Director (Regulatory Services) ECBC
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Mark Finch	- Finance Manager BDC
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Benefits)
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services)
Liz Watts	- Director FH&SEBC
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer BDC

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Introductions

Due to the number of new faces introductions were made around the table.

24/14 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 30 June 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

25/14 PERFORMANCE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 5)

(a) **Operational Performance**

The Strategic Manager (Support Services) presented the report as at 31 July 2014 and invited questions.

The Chairman noted that only 49% of those responding to the Customer Survey found using the online process straightforward or easy.

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<p>The Strategic Manager agreed. The website needed to be more user-friendly and that was something that was being looked at.</p>	
<p>With regard to the Balanced Scorecard, Councillor Ray requested that in future the relevant Council's name should be on every page for clarity. He also questioned the dramatic drop in successful investigations on page 11.</p>	Stuart Philpot
<p>The Head of ARP explained that month by month figures were not available for the previous year and therefore there was no direct comparison.</p>	
<p>Finally the Chairman requested that the colours be amended as it was very difficult to read the text against the dark green background.</p>	Stuart Philpot
<p>The report was otherwise noted.</p>	
<p>(b) <u>Financial Performance</u></p>	
<p>The Finance Manager (BDC) presented the report which included outcomes from the Management restructure.</p>	
<p>The Partnership budgets had been consolidated with Fenland and Waveney and Suffolk Coastal giving a total of £10million, equivalent to that of a small District Council. It was noted that in future the Partnership would have to submit a full set of accounts as it would no longer qualify as a Small Body.</p>	
<p>There was a sizeable increase in turnover with the new Partners and the figures forecast a small saving of about £7,000 despite set-up costs.</p>	
<p>The variances were highlighted in the notes. The anomaly of the £112,000 income to Waveney & Suffolk Coastal was offset by expenditure budgets and would be netted in the budget.</p>	
<p>Councillor Ray asked how the forecast figures could be so precise and the Finance Manager explained that as the establishment and the main contracts were already in place the forecasts could be reasonably accurate. No significant changes were expected but there could still be some fluctuations.</p>	
<p>Councillor Mildmay-White asked about the Magistrates court costs and was advised that an unintended consequence of the changes to the Benefits system was that costs had increased. However, the income from fines would come back to the Authority.</p>	
<p>Councillor Jolly asked about the Reserves. The Finance Manager</p>	

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explained that there had been about £155,000 carried forward, which had been topped up by another £50,000 agreed at the last meeting. The Operational Improvement Board (OIB) had been given delegated authority to spend the money on certain projects. There was no set policy and the Joint Committee decided annually what to do with the Reserves.

The Head of ARP noted that it was expected that the Partnership would receive £700,000 in New Burden funding in the current year and it was hoped that the majority of that would not be needed. The OIB would discuss what to do with that money.

The report was noted.

26/14 THE ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP (ARP) SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of ARP presented the report which detailed progress made against the recommendations from Activist. The Partnership had expanded taking in three new authorities since the recommendations had been made and benchmarking and a restructure had been carried out.

The biggest outstanding element was to decide on the right vehicle for moving forward. The Corporate Director (Fenland) provided an update on that.

There had been correspondence with the three Actuaries regarding the pension positions and they had provided an indicative cost of £35,000 to investigate that issue on behalf of all Partners, including Waveney and Suffolk Coastal.

Before committing to spending that money he thought it would be wise for all Members to attend a workshop at which the options, such as Teckal or Lead Authority would be explained so that Members could be clear on which direction they wanted to proceed. The pension modelling could then be carried out before a final decision was made.

The Chairman suggested that training should be provided for Members and staff on everything about the ARP, including the acronyms used. It would be especially useful for Substitute Members who might be required to vote on decisions without having any background knowledge about the Partnership.

Councillor Ray asked what period the Service Plan covered and the Head of ARP said that it was a living document which would be presented to the Joint Committee every six months. It would cover a rolling programme with new items added as others were completed. It was a requirement that the Plan was approved by the Joint Committee before 3 November each year.

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RESOLVED that:

- (1) the progress against the Activist recommendations was noted;
- (2) the Service Delivery Plan at Appendix A to the report was approved;
- (3) the Service Delivery Plan would be updated and performance against the Plan would be reported to Members every six months;
- (4) Members would be invited to a workshop to discuss the options for the way forward; and
- (5) Members and staff from all of the Partner authorities, including Waveney and Suffolk Coastal would be invited to receive training about the ARP.

27/14 WAVENEY AND SUFFOLK COASTAL DISTRICT COUNCILS (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Head of ARP referred to the Business Case which had been presented to the Committee in October 2013. A single officer core was in operation across the seven authorities and it was now recommended that Waveney and Suffolk Coastal District Councils be admitted as full voting members of the Joint Committee.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

It was further **RESOLVED** to **RECOMMEND TO THE PARTNER AUTHORITIES** that:

- (1) Waveney District Council and Suffolk Coastal District Council become full members of the Anglia Revenues Partnership; and
- (2) the Operational Improvement Board be given delegated authority to negotiate a new Anglia Revenues Partnership agreement to include Waveney District and Suffolk Coastal District Councils as full members of the Anglia Revenues Partnership.

Councillor Wassell asked what the optimum number of members of the Committee would be, bearing in mind the law of diminishing returns. The Head of ARP suggested that that question could be part of the discussions at the workshop to be held to review the Partnership's strategic direction.

The Chairman was concerned that the Partnership might become overstretched and Councillor Ray thought that it would be better to focus on selling services to gain extra income.

28/14 WELFARE REFORM (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) gave a brief update. Things had settled down and no new data had been received about the Universal Credit pilots. There was a commitment from the coalition to review the situation in 2015.

With regard to the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy, a Private Member's Bill has had a successful first reading. It looked to build in exemptions for people who had not been able to move to alternative accommodation and to apply exemptions to disabled people where a couple required separate bedrooms and to those whose homes had been adapted for their disabled needs. The changes would affect Working Age Housing Benefit customers.

Nothing further to report.

29/14 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The date of the next meeting was noted. It would probably be held in a different room to provide more space. Details would be confirmed on the next Agenda.

30/14 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 11)

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

31/14 FUTURE OF COUNTER FRAUD WORK OF ARP (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) sought approval for a bid to the DWP for funding to tackle fraud and for delegated authority to be given to the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) to put that resource in place if the bid was successful.

It was proposed to run an in-house service on behalf of the Partnership. The County Council would benefit from the service as well and it was suggested that they should be approached for help to continue the service if it was successful. They were also applying for funding and the bids were complimentary to each other and could lead to a County-wide approach.

It was noted that as well as benefits fraud there was also corporate fraud and there could be work for the Housing Associations on tenancy fraud.

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Councillor Mildmay-White asked if there were any problems with data sharing and the Head of ARP advised that there were agreements in place which would be explained in the Fraud Report for the next meeting.

Lucy Burt

The Corporate Director (Fenland) said that they had a data sharing protocol in East Cambs which might be helpful and he would send the details to the Head of ARP.

Rob Bridge

RESOLVED that:

- (1) the bid to the DCLG Counter Fraud Fund be noted;
- (2) authority be delegated to the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) to seek alternative funding if that bid was unsuccessful; and
- (3) authority be delegated to the OIB to fund a Counter Fraud resource for a period of 12 months.

32/14 ENFORCEMENT AGENCY (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Head of ARP reminded Members that a business case had been presented to the Joint Committee in October 2013 concerning the delivery of an in-house enforcement service. More work had been carried out and a conservative estimate of income and a realistic estimate of costs indicated that there was the potential to provide shared income. Authority was sought to determine how to implement and deliver such a service.

Councillor Wassell agreed that it could provide important income, but he felt it was just as important to have control to target those that would not pay rather than those that could not pay.

The Head of ARP agreed that that approach would be applied and people would always be given the opportunity to pay to avoid the fee.

Councillor Jolly welcomed the prospect of more control but asked about the companies that currently carried out the work for the ARP. The Head of ARP advised that they were already aware of the proposals and were quite supportive. It was likely that they would still be used for some cases.

As the decision needed to be referred to the partner authorities it was suggested that a 'public' report should be prepared, excluding the sensitive data concerning costs, etc. It was noted that the charges were statutory and that fact would be added to the report. It should also be clarified that the service would be for all seven councils even if the recommendation to include Waveney and Suffolk Coastal as full Partners was not supported.

Paul
Corney

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RESOLVED to **RECOMMEND TO THE PARTNER
AUTHORITIES** that authority be delegated to the ARP
Operational Improvement Board to introduce an
Enforcement Agency as detailed in the full business case
appraisal.

The meeting closed at 3.05 pm

CHAIRMAN