

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Benefits performance continues to meet profiled targets and is on course to achieve year end targets. It should also be noted that Benefits performance for all partners in respect of new claims and change of circumstances continues to be very close to or exceeds the national figures published by the DWP.

Phase two of the single EDMS system project is progressing well as the Service seeks to fully utilise the resilience of wider teams within the partnership through finalising the standardisation of processes and procedures. One aspect of this is developing system functionality to automatically distribute work to facilitate more efficient working and improved performance.

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

Funding towards Single Person Discount work has been secured from Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils, whilst Cambridge County have agreed funding subject to satisfactory results.

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 team exceeded the Business Case savings approved by Joint Committee for 2015/16; as work has progressed we have developed a better understanding of the opportunities and the savings the team can achieve.

Targets for 2016/17 were agreed by Joint Committee in March; performance has continued to exceed expectations, delivering increased savings. Accordingly, after the excellent performance seen in the first three months of this year, the following revised targets have been agreed:

Description of financial saving	Estimated financial saving (£)		
	Annual	Performance	2016/17

	2016/17 target	1.4.16- 30.6.16	proposed revised annual target
Single Person Discount fraud	300,000	269,000	500,000
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	53,000	150,000
Tenancy fraud	360,000	252,000	400,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	50,000	133,000	250,000
Total financial savings	860,000	707,000	1,300,000

It should be noted that we are exploring the implementation of further data matching enhancements which may have a further positive impact on savings generated, this has the potential to feed into exceeding the revised target at the end of the year.

Revenues

Performance continues to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Suffolk Coastal District Council. This 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. Although the collection fund is under target we are working with the Finance team to ensure appeals provision is made in the accounts.

The funding secured from Suffolk and Norfolk County Council enables the further recovery work to continue. Cambridgeshire County Council has also agreed to provide funding if the results justify their contribution. The further recovery team have collected £124,014.02 in this financial year which includes £26,408.29 in respect of cases raised this year.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well. The amount collected in the first quarter of 2016/17 matches that collected in the same quarter last year, matching the performance of external Enforcement Agents. The team achieved their single highest payment recently, collecting £64K in respect of a business rates debt. 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.

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.

A review of all long term empty domestic properties is also underway in order to maximise the new homes bonus which is paid to Authorities based on the number of new housing units either built or brought back into use. The figures used to calculate the bonus are those which appear on the CTB1 (Council Tax Base) return to Government which is completed in October each year.

We now have another Business Improvement District (BID) bringing the total in the partnership to 3. This is a levy placed upon the businesses in the designated area and collected alongside Non-Domestic Rates. The monies collected are used to fund projects within the area e.g. CCTV

DCLG have agreed some new Enterprise Zones which came into effect on 1 April 2016. There are three new Enterprise Zones which brings the total within the partnership to 4. In these areas businesses receive 100% rates relief for up to 5 years which is fully funded by the Government. The rates income for these properties is retained locally and divided between the Local Authority and the Local Enterprise Partnership as agreed when the Enterprise Zone is established.

Support

Imaging System (EDMS)

The imaging system is essential for the efficient processing and storing of incoming and outgoing documents electronically for Revenues and Benefits. The three newest partners, Waveney DC, Suffolk Coastal DC and Fenland DC have now migrated all their images to the shared imaging system provided by CIVICA.

The first stage of aligning daily incoming documents to one single set of document types for all seven partners has been completed and all staff, irrespective of which office they are based at, are now able to work with documents across the whole partnership providing a greater operational resilience during site specific peaks of work.

The single instance of CIVICA W2 has been used for all partners since January 2016 and the historical documents for Fenland DC, Waveney DC and Suffolk Coastal DC transferred across to CIVICA-W2 from Information@work, the previous imaging system.

With all sites aligned to the current working practices on the Imaging System, stage 2 is now underway to enhance the functionality of the system and maximise available automation of document processing.

ICT upgrade

An essential upgrade to the software platform used for the core Capita Revenues and Benefits calculation system has been undertaken during June and July, supported by CAPITA, for all seven partners. The project has required all the data tables from the live system to be copied to the new platform (Red Hat Enterprise Linux, RHEL6) supported by Capita Software Services and a full testing of all processes and bulk automated jobs carried out by specialised staff from Council Tax, Business Rates, Benefits and System Administration before going live on the new platform.

The first three upgrades, for Breckland DC, Forest Heath DC and Suffolk Coastal DC have now been completed and the remaining four databases for will be copied to the new platform scheduled to start at the end of August.

In addition to most of the ICT work being completed outside of normal office hours, the ability to work on any database has minimised staff time lost as a result of individual databases not being available. At any one time there has been a planned minimum of three LIVE databases fully available to all staff, as is the case during Annual Billing.