

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Benefits performance continues to meet profiled targets and is on course to achieve year end targets. Universal Credit delays, increased customer contact and evidence gather to determine Local Council Tax Support entitlements is starting to impact processing at Waveney; these matters have been raised locally and nationally through the UC/LA Steering group that the Strategic Manager (Benefits) attends.

Phase two of the single EDMS system project is nearly complete as the Benefits Service utilises the resilience of wider teams within the partnership, through standardising work processes and system functionality to automatically distribute work, thereby enabling 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 now agreed funding; to date ARP have recouped their investments.

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 despite needing to recruit a new Compliance Officer.

Description of financial saving	2016/17 target	Performance
		1.4.16- 30.9.16
Single Person Discount fraud	500,000	363,000
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	124,000
Tenancy fraud	400,000	270,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	250,000	193,419
Total financial savings	1,300,000	950,419

The Strategic
Manager

(Benefits) has joined a national DWP/LA Housing Benefit Operational Steering Group to have input

into shaping and influencing current and proposed operational matters. One current strand is a review of the SFIS transfer and in particular the procedures implemented. Along with my Fraud Manager I hosted a meeting with the DWP at Thetford where we represented the Steering Groups concerns and suggestions; these have been accepted and will be implemented nationally by the DWP. Further, the DWP have arranged to visit the ARP Fraud team and our local DWP counterparts, to learn from the initiatives we have put in place and to recommend them as best practice to other Councils.

Revenues

Performance continues to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Suffolk Coastal District Council, Waveney District Council & Fenland District Council. The reason behind the drop in collection for Suffolk Coastal was reported at the previous Joint Committee 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. Fenland and Waveney District Council's targets have also not been met due to large backdated appeals for which provision has been made in the accounts.

The funding secured from Suffolk and Norfolk County Council enables the further recovery work to continue. Cambridgeshire County Council has now also agreed to provide funding. The further recovery team have collected £288,000.79 in this financial year which includes £119,528.74 in respect of cases raised this year.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well; collection for the first half of the year is comparable with that collected by external Enforcement Agents before the establishment of the in-house team. It must also be remembered that 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 therefore expect collection to increase as the year progresses. An additional two Enforcement Agents have been recruited due to increase in workload, however one was not a certificated agent and therefore could not commence visits immediately. Added to this one of our original Enforcement Agents resigned from their post. 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 has been completed 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. All partners have seen a reduction in the number of long term empty properties apart from Breckland and Suffolk Coastal where there has been a large increase in the number of new properties. 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.

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 2017. Nationally the total rateable value has increased and consequently the multiplier will reduce as the overall effect of a revaluation is neutralised.

Small business rates relief is being 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. Also 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.

Support

Automation of Outgoing Post

The ARP now has 95% of all mail, including annual billing, handled by the external mailing provider Critiqom, maximising the postage discounts available by use of Primepost . During September the ARP has gone live with Critiqom's "IQPost Me", a solution to deal with individual letters produced by users, for example when writing out for more information from the customer. The IQPost Me facility is used by all of the staff of the ARP at all four sites and is available for all homeworkers. This has significantly cut down the amount of outgoing post printed and packed at Breckland House.

As a result of these changes, the QA and Admin Support Manager has now centralised the post room at Thetford to deal with all incoming Revenues and Benefits mail for the seven partners of the ARP and printing and packing the remaining outgoing paper documents not sent to Critiqom.

ICT upgrade

An essential upgrade to the software platform for all seven partners is progressing as planned. 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 has involved full testing of all processes and bulk automated jobs, carried out by specialised staff from Council Tax, Business Rates, Benefits and Systems Administration before going live on the new platform.

Following the completion of the first three upgrades for Breckland DC, Forest Heath DC and Suffolk Coastal DC. three more upgrades were carried out for East Cambs DC, Waveney DC and St Edmundsbury DC during September. Most of the ICT work was completed outside of normal office hours and the ability to work on any database has resulted in no 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. The upgrade of the Fenland DC data also includes a migration from a Windows platform to a Linux platform, due to be completed during December. This will result in all seven databases using the same structure.

E-billing and Landlord online account

As part 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 sign up to E-billing via the ARP Website. For each sign up, the postal cost for billing to the customer will be eliminated. As with all online portals, details can be accessed twenty four hours a day, seven days a week and it is also anticipated 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.