

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Benefits performance continues to meet profiled targets and is on course to achieve year end targets. Following the introduction of automated drip fed work allocation, ongoing adjustments are being made to equalise performance for all Councils, whilst we manage performance against vacancies.

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

Continued funding has been secured from Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils to support the review of Single Person Discounts, whilst a business case has been developed for Cambridgeshire to secure funding for this year.

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.

Description of financial saving	2017/18 target	Performance 1.4.17- 31.7.17
	Single Person Discount fraud	500,000
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	85,537
Tenancy fraud	400,000	180,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	250,000	639,197
Total financial savings	1,300,000	1,093,142

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) continues to participate in a national DWP/LA Housing Benefit Steering Group to have input into shaping and influencing current and proposed operational matters. Current topics include Universal Credit plans, LA financing and data share.

Revenues

Performance continues to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Waveney District Council and Council Tax collection for Breckland Council. The reason behind the drop in NNDR collection for Waveney District Council is a significant amount of refunds as a result in successful appeals by ratepayers against their Rateable Values, these are often back dated to 1 April 2010. Breckland Council is slightly behind Council Tax collection target but is forecast to be back on target by the end of August.

The funding secured from Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire County Councils has enabled the further recovery work to continue this financial year. Suffolk and Norfolk County Council have agreed to continue this funding and negotiations will continue with Cambridgeshire County Council. The further recovery team have collected £177,148.35 in this financial year. In addition to the monies collected by the further recovery team we also have a further £1,342,554 in secured debt by way of Charging Orders on property owned by the debtor.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well, having collected £6.6 Million since the team started of which £1.5 Million has been in this financial year. Following a procurement exercise earlier this year we have migrated to a new Enforcement system known as One-Step solutions. This is the system used by most external agencies and should provide a more efficient system for both the office based team and the Enforcement Agents.

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.

The annual review of Empty Homes is taking place in order to maximise the new homes bonus. The review started in May with enquiry forms being issued to all empty homes across the partnership. Where possible we work with the Housing Teams to encourage the owners of these properties to bring them back into use. We are now following up all unreturned forms with visits in order that the review is complete by the end of September in readiness for the completion of the Council Tax Base return which is used to calculate the authorities New Homes Bonus.

An NNDR revaluation came into effect from 1 April 2017 with an antecedent date of 1 April 2015. Nationally the total rateable value has increased and consequently the multiplier has reduced as the overall effect of a revaluation is neutralised. The multiplier has been confirmed at 47.9p or 46.6p for small businesses compared to the previous financial year of 49.7p and 48.4p respectively.

The following changes have also been made:-

- Small business rates relief has 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 £15000 RV.
- 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. This will be a self-funding scheme and consequently and properties seeing a large reduction will have a premium applied to their account.
- Mandatory Rural rate relief has also been increased from 50% to 100%.
- Government is funding rate relief of £1500 for local newspaper offices.
- The minimum RV for charging Empty Property Rates has been increased from £2600 to £2900
- Explanatory notes which have previously been sent with the business rates bills can now be published on the internet instead.

In the budget on 8 March 2017 the Chancellor announced further help for small and rural businesses losing small business rates relief as a result of the revaluation, public houses and additional funding for a discretionary relief scheme to help businesses facing the steepest increases. Whilst the Government prescribed the details for the first two of these measures the third required a scheme to be devised and approved by each authority. All of these schemes have now been approved and work is underway to grant the relief on all eligible accounts.

One of the tasks in our Digital transformation programme is to review all correspondence. Working with the Customer Services Forum we have recently reviewed the Council Tax reminder and final notices using behaviour and nudge techniques. We will monitor how effective the new designs are in increasing collection at this stage and review the design where necessary. Attached to this report are samples of the new designs (Appendix 1, 2 and 3).

Support

Digital Transformation and Self Service

The Anglia Revenues Partnership has now successfully rolled out a new customer self-service facility primarily for the use of all Customer Services staff. From any of the seven partner sites customer service can assist customers, either face to face or over the telephone with setting up their self-serve account, including paperless billing and notifications,

Every customer from any of the ARP partner councils can set up their own self-serve account for paperless Council Tax Bills, Business Rates Bills, Benefits Notifications and landlord notifications via the ARP Website. For each sign up, the postal cost for billing to the customer will be eliminated for bills and notifications and are instead available online. An email with a link to the account sign in area is sent to each customer when bills and notifications are produced. When signed up to paperless billing and notifications, the customer can simply view the document and save electronically or print out at home if they wish.

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.

As with all online portals, details can be accessed twenty four hours a day, seven days a week and it is also anticipated the use of the online account will reduce the number of customer contacts.

A reporting mechanism measuring paperless take up has been developed and is sent out to all partners' Customer Services on a monthly basis. This demonstrate the effectiveness of the take up at all sites. At the end of July 2017, across the Anglia Revenues Partnership. 9,549 customers were signed up to paperless Billing and paperless notifications, over 2,000 of which have signed up since March 31st 2017. Work will continue with customer services teams across the partnership to increase the take up,

External Mailing

The Anglia Revenues Partnership uses an external Mailing Company, Critiqom Ltd. for the printing, packaging and despatch of 93% of the outgoing mail, both daily and annual billing. This has kept the postage cost to a minimum with automation of the process from the electronic files received by Critiqom from the ARP.

Over the coming months, in preparation for the Annual Billing project for 2018-19 year, the ARP are working closely with Critiqom to move the outgoing post to Mail Mark, using state of the art barcoding technology for Royal Mail. In addition to being able to secure the lowest cost possible, using Mail Mark there is also an ability to track the progress of mail from the point it leaves the printers to the final Royal Mail sorting office before actual delivery.

Anglia Revenues Website

It is now two years since the launch of the new look, primary transactional, website and the Anglia Revenues Partnership are now in the process of refreshing the website. The ARP is currently working on a new set of web pages for Business Rates, using the findings from the University City of London Interaction Lab, who carried out User Experience Reviews of five of the most popular “user journeys” on the ARP website.

The refresh has three stages to consider:

1. Structure – to aim to have a set up for the customer, when seeking information, has a maximum a three clicks to reach the information they are looking for.
2. Language – straight forward understandable language.
3. Helpful links to further useful information, such as Government advice websites.

The Testing of the effectiveness of the website will be using volunteers to carry out specific scenarios on the current website then repeating the scenarios in the new refreshed website. They will then be asked to feedback on the effectiveness, speed and efficiency of each scenario. This will provide a measurement of the improvements achieved by the refresh.