

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Benefits performance continues to meet profiled targets; whilst Housing Benefit is on course to achieve year end targets, work is underway to ensure Council Tax Support performance achieves the year end target. Performance is being affected by a higher number of vacancies than usual, with new entrant training and recruitment ongoing.

We recently held a work clearance campaign day where staff were incentivised and motivated to clear a significant amount of work – this was very effective in reducing work to a level that has since been maintained. However, clearing large volumes of work has had, as expected, a slight detrimental impact on performance reporting.

Following the introduction of automated drip fed work allocation, ongoing adjustments are being made to improve performance for all Councils.

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, with Cambridgeshire agreeing to fund subject to 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. Conversations are underway with Housing Associations regarding charging for these services through the ARP Trading Company.

During the past few months the team have identified several large increases in business assessments leading to a corresponding increase in the overall value identified. We do not expect this pattern to continue, therefore we are not proposing to change the target.

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- 30.10.17
	Single Person Discount fraud	500,000
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	152,691
Tenancy fraud	400,000	288,000

Other (Council Tax and NDR)	250,000	955,172
Total financial savings	1,300,000	1,699,873

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) continues to participate in national DWP/LA Housing Benefit Steering Groups 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, Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury Borough Council. The reason behind the drop in NNDR collection for all these authorities 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. However, provision is made in the accounts for such circumstances. It should also be noted that the NNDR collection profiles for this year may differ significantly from the previous year due to the revaluation and timing of the settlement of backdated appeals.

We now have agreement from all County Councils to provide funding towards the further recovery work. Suffolk & Norfolk County Council have agreed to fund this work until March 2019. The further recovery team have collected £428,090.70 in this financial year. In addition to the monies collected by the further recovery team we also have a further £1,402,767.98 in secured debt by way of Charging Orders on property owned by the debtor.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well, having collected £7 Million since the team started of which £2.5 Million has been in this financial year. A fifth Enforcement Agent has recently joined us and is currently undergoing training to obtain certification. We have also had enquiries from 5 other authorities with a view to taking on their Enforcement work.

The annual review of Empty Homes was completed before the submission of the Council Tax Base return in October which is used to calculate the New Homes Bonus. This exercise is carried out each year in order to ensure that our records are correct and the level of property registered as empty on our records is maintained. In the period from May 2017, when we started the process, to October 2017, the number of empty properties has reduced as shown below:

Authority	Reduction in Empty Properties (May to October)
Breckland	23
East Cambridgeshire	54
Fenland	66
Forest Heath	43
St Edmundsbury	43
Suffolk Coastal	156
Waveney	83

The New Homes Bonus is based on the increase in the number of chargeable dwellings and the movement in the number of empty dwellings between each October. All authorities have seen an increase in the number of chargeable dwellings and most have seen a reduction in the number of empty properties as below:

Authority	No of additional chargeable dwellings for NHB	No empty properties - decrease or increase	No of Uninhabitable - decrease or increase	No of empty properties for NHB - decrease or increase
Breckland	594	-14	-20	6
East Cambs	117	0	2	-2
Fenland	439	-3	0	-3
Forest Heath	364	-15	0	-15
St Edmundsbury	44	5	-9	14
Suffolk Coastal	483	-68	-11	-57
Waveney	163	-33	-15	-18

The number of chargeable dwellings does not include those registered as exempt. St Edmundsbury BC has seen a large increase in exempt properties in the last year which has resulted in a smaller increase in chargeable dwellings as compared to other authorities.

The figure used to calculate the increase/decrease in the number of empty properties does not include uninhabitable properties and therefore whilst the overall number of empty properties may have reduced, the total used for New Homes Bonus calculation will be negatively affected by a reduction in the number of uninhabitable properties. (Properties are only classed as uninhabitable and receive a discount for a maximum of one 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.

The new rate reliefs announced by Government have now been implemented and reliefs awarded in respect of the three new schemes:

- Supporting small business relief
- Public Houses
- New discretionary scheme

We are following up those application forms which have not been returned and ensuring that any businesses which have moved into a property since the original modelling was completed are invited to apply if it appears they meet the criteria.

Council Tax bills and adjustments notices were redesigned earlier this year and recently the newly designed reminders and final notices have gone live. As reported previously we will monitor their effectiveness and amend if necessary. The final document which is going to be reviewed at this stage is the exempt notice and work is underway.

Support

Anglia Revenues Website - www.AngliaRevenues.gov.uk

Since the launch of the new primarily transactional website, the Anglia Revenues Partnership are now in the process of refreshing site, aiming to make it easier for the customer to use.

The refresh has three areas 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 ARP has now successfully implemented the review of the web pages for Business Rates, employing the user experience training provided from the University City of London Interaction Lab with the structure and design of the site.

In collaboration with the University City of London, User Experience Reviews of five of the most popular “user journeys” on the ARP website were undertaken, giving a valuable insight into an effective web page design for the services.

A robust testing process has been developed in order to measure the improvements to the Anglia Revenues Partnership website. A number of volunteers were given three scenarios to search the website. Data collected is designed to measure speed, efficiency and effectiveness of the new site with the volunteers carrying out the scenario testing on both the old site and the new site. The initial results show a significant improvement in the speed, efficiency and effectiveness of the Business Rates element of the website.

A refresh of the Council Tax element of the website is now underway, using the same methodology employed for Business Rates. This refresh is scheduled to be in place by mid-February, in time for the Annual Billing project to help maximise the take up of customer self-serve through the website.

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 and back office operational staff. Customer Services from any of the seven partner sites can assist customers either face to face or over the telephone with setting up their self-serve account and therefore move to paperless billing and notifications. As at October 31st 2017, more than 11,000 Council Tax payers had opted for self-service, reducing the number of letters printed and sent out at year end alone by the same number. When Bills or notifications are produced, Customers will receive an electronic notification to prompt them to access their account via the Anglia Revenues Partnership website, in order to view all correspondence either on their computer or mobile device.

As with all online portals, details can be accessed twenty four hours a day, seven days a week and it is has already been reported by one partner the use of the online account has seen a fall in the number of customer contact and Landlord contact.

External Mailing

The Anglia Revenues Partnership uses an external Mailing Company, Critiqom Ltd for printing, packaging and despatch of 93% of all outgoing mail, both daily and annual billing. This has kept the postage cost to a minimum by automating of the process, including the matching of Benefits Notifications with Council Tax Bills from the electronic files sent to Critiqom from the ARP.

The ARP is using state of the art barcoding technology for all daily outgoing post handled by Royal Mail, giving the ability to track the progress of mail from the point it leaves the printers to the final Royal Mail sorting office before actual delivery, attracting the maximum discount for the postage costs available.