

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
FOREST HEATH DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL
WAVENEY DISTRICT COUNCIL
SUFFOLK COASTAL DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

**Held on Tuesday, 5 December 2017 at 10.00 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT**

PRESENT

Mr P.D. Claussen	Mr R. Kerry
Mr D. Ambrose Smith	Mr B. Provan
Mr S. Edwards	Mr C. Seaton
Mr I. Houlder	

In Attendance

Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Brendan Arnold	- Chief Finance Officer and Corporate Director
Alison Chubbock	- Chief Accountant (Deputy Section 151 Officer) (BDC)
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Homira Javadi	- Chief Finance Officer S151 (Suffolk Coastal District Council)
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Benefits)
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer
Emma Grima	- Director of Commercial Services
Greg Stevenson	- Service Manager (Finance & Performance)

33/17 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2017 were confirmed as a correct record subject to one of the job titles being amended accordingly.

34/17 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Mr Gregory Stevenson was in attendance in place of Jill Korwin, Director (Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury) who had sent her apologies for the meeting.

35/17 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

36/17 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

**37/17 ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE: (STANDING ITEM)
(AGENDA ITEM 5)**

The order of the reports was changed to accommodate the Chief Accountant

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(BDC) as she had another meeting to attend in London. The finance report and 2018/19 budget was therefore discussed first under agenda item 5(a).

(a) Finance Report and 2018/19 Budget

The Chief Accountant (BDC) presented the reports, two of which were tabled at the meeting including the Forecast Full Year Financial Performance report as at 31 October 2017 and the Transformation Funding – committed expenditure report that highlighted the funding spent and the progress to date.

Appendix A of the agenda pack set out the proposed budget for 2018-19 compared to the budget for 2017-18 with indicative budgets for the following two years. Further tables highlighted the share of costs for each authority, and the proportion that any additional costs or savings against the budget would be shared. Various key assumptions had been made and Members were asked to note that the indicative budget for 2020-21 was some 5.4% lower than the 2015-16 budget (subject to the efficiencies being delivered).

Section 1.5 of the report recommended that the year-end saving be distributed back to the partner authorities, providing a return on their investment, in advance of the expected return.

RESOLVED that:

1. the Partnership budget at Appendix A for 2018-19 be approved; and
2. any final full year 2017-18 surplus for the Partnership be distributed back to the partner authorities in the approved shares.

(b) Highlight Report

The Strategic Manager (Support Services) presented the report.

Benefits Performance

Performance was being affected by a higher number of vacancies than usual; however, 7 new starters would be commencing employment for ARP in January 2018.

Fraud

Work was on-going and the table highlighted on page 7 of the agenda recorded the excellent work of the team and the financial savings were on track to exceed targets for the year.

Revenues

Performance continued to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Waveney District Council, Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury Borough Councils. The reason for this was due to a significant amount of refunds as a result of successful appeals by ratepayers against their rateable values. The NNDR collection profiles for this year differed from the previous year due to the revaluation and timing of the settlement of backdated appeals.

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Enforcement Team

The Enforcement Team continued to perform well, having collected £7m since the Team started of which £2.5m had been in this financial year.

The Chief Finance Officer S151 (Suffolk Coastal District Council) asked that under the table of financial savings further information should be provided – breakdown of fraud analysis for each individual authority and what each authority retained.

Councillor Houlder hoped that ARP's Enforcement Team had not been involved in the recent evictions as the main reason for setting up in-house was to treat customers with respect for whatever reason. The Strategic Manager (Revenues) advised that at the end of year where a customer was having financial difficulties, the Team would adjust payment arrangements to allow payment of the new year's charge to try and prevent the situation re-occurring.

It was felt that any arrears issues should be reported back to each respective Cabinet.

Councillor Claussen wanted to know how much fraud was wilful fraud. The Strategic Manager (Support Services) explained that Housing Benefit was not the responsibility of ARP it was DWP. The Head of ARP pointed out that DWP had changed the definition of fraud – fraud and error had been amalgamated into one which had made it very difficult but repeat offences were investigated.

Support

ARP had successfully implemented the review of the web pages for Business Rates a refresh of the Council Tax element of the website was now underway using the same methodology.

A successful rollout of a new customer self-service facility and as at 31 October 2017 more than 11,000 Council tax payers had opted for the self-service option.

An external mailing company, Critiqom Ltd, had been used for printing, packaging and despatch of 93% of all outgoing mail. This had kept postage costs to a minimum. A state of the art barcoding technology was also being used for all daily outgoing post handled by Royal Mail providing the ability to track the progress of mail from the point it left the printers to the final Royal mail sorting office before actual delivery, this had attracted a maximum discount for the postage costs of approximately 27p per letter (exc. stationery).

The report was otherwise noted.

(c) Balance Scorecard

The Strategic Manager (Support Services) presented the report.

As explained under Minutes No. 36(c) the collection budget management was under target for Forest Heath, St Edmundsbury and Waveney Councils

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due to the successful appeals by GP surgeries.

Breckland Council's scorecard as at the end of October 2017 had improved and the indicators for collection amounts had changed from amber to green. The performance target was being met in relation to benefit claims and was on target for end of year.

Councillor Edwards asked if the aforementioned appeals were all from GP Surgeries. Members were informed that they were; however, the issuing of business rate refunds in respect of GP surgeries would shortly come to an end although the figures for November were slightly worse than October. The latest figures would be obtained.

The Chairman was aware that the launch of Universal Credit had been pushed back again. The Strategic Manager (Benefits) said that the news that Universal Credit had been delayed for a further 3 months had been welcomed and was a positive move by the Government.

Referring to the business rate refunds, Councillor Ambrose-Smith asked if hospitals would be receiving such a reduction as East Cambridgeshire had written off approximately £100k. Members were informed that there had been claims for charitable relief and there was a current claim in for 80% mandatory relief from Suffolk hospital. The majority; however, was for companies that had gone into liquidation.

The report was otherwise noted.

38/17 INFORMATION ABOUT DIRECTORS OF THE ARP TRADING COMPANY AND OPERATIONAL IMPROVEMENT BOARD REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Emma Grima, Commercial Director presented the report. This report had been requested by the Joint Committee at a previous meeting and was for information only.

There was much discussion and concerns raised about the role and responsibilities of the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) as Directors of the Trading Company.

The Head of ARP said that it was his understanding that each Council could decide who to nominate to sit on the Trading Company which was the way that the Shareholders Agreement had been set up.

The report and appendix was otherwise noted.

39/17 SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN AND RISK REGISTER (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of ARP presented the report.

The report incorporated the achievements, the day to day service, projects and risks and Members were being asked to note the progress in respect of the December 2016 Service Delivery Plan (SDP) and approve the revised SDP and Risk Register at Appendix A of the report.

It was noted that such a report would be presented to the ARP Joint Committee twice a year.

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Members were updated on one of the risks - all 7 audits could be signed off and had been achieved for 2016/17.

Councillor Claussen asked if the appendices could be printed on A3 paper in future as they were difficult to read.

One of the risks mentioned was in relation to the high staff turnover. Members were informed that this was mainly about the amount of people that ARP employed – it had nothing to do with pay or working conditions although it was a concern and was being investigated.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith asked felt that some re-assurance on this matter should be provided at the next meeting.

RESOLVED that:

1. the progress in respect of the December 2016 Service Delivery Plan be noted; and
2. the revised Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register at Appendix A of the report be approved.

40/17 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Strategic Manager (Benefits) presented the report and provided Members with a detailed overview of recent developments in relation to Universal Credit (UC) waiting times and the recent move in temporary accommodation.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Manager for working with the MP for Waveney. Councillor Houlder also conveyed his thanks. He thought it would be interesting to know how many people would be moving to UC for each authority and the increase in workloads that this would create.

Members were informed that the data could be collected and would be shared accordingly.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith also thanked the Strategic Manager for the recent debrief he provided to East Cambs Members.

The report was otherwise noted.

41/17 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 9)

None.

42/17 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The arrangements for the next meeting were noted to take place on Tuesday, 27 March 2018 (not 2017).

The meeting closed at 10.50 am

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CHAIRMAN