

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Housing Benefits performance is on track to meet year end targets. However, for four of the Councils as shown in the Balanced Scorecard, the target for the processing of Council Tax Support cases is not likely to be met at the end of the financial year. We expect the final year end figure for these Councils to be nearer to or slightly below 9 days against a target of 8 days. The three other Councils are expected to achieve the target by the end of the year.

Measures have been put in place, detailed below, to improve performance.

Typically we see a pattern where work that peaks in the first two quarters of the year are offset by an improving position as we go through quarters 3 & 4. However, this year we have seen the impact of staff vacancies during the first half of the reporting period along with the embedding and settling down of standardised work processes in our document imaging system. The implementation of these changes along with the introduction of document weightings took longer than expected to bed down, but is now providing greater and targeted control of work allocation, which has contributed to improvement since quarter 3.

Performance has also continued to improve as new recruits underwent training and started to become effective and staff became increasingly accustomed to new work processes - we continue to work with staff to refine processes.

We expect these measures will mean that Council Tax Support cases have achieved or are very close to 8 days for quarter 4 of this year; during the last month we have processed Council Tax support cases in 8 days or less, with a similar direction of travel as we go in to the new-year.

With recruitment underway to fill a number of vacancies, we have recruited a temporary agency resource to keep performance on target in the first quarter of the new-year.

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.

Through the ARP Management arrangement with Norwich City Council, we have employed an additional resource from the 1st April 2018, fully funded by Norwich City Council and Norfolk County Council, to undertake similar work for Norwich City Council.

Furthermore, the team are working with Housing Teams and Housing Associations to tackle Right to buy and subletting abuse and are having success in this area.

During the year the team have identified several dwellings and businesses either not registered or having had an undeclared change in use that has led to increased charges - in some cases significant higher retrospective charges.

We will continue to find cases that should be registered but it is unlikely to be on the same scale, 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- 28.2.18
Single Person Discount fraud	500,000	842,854
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	188,105
Tenancy fraud	400,000	432,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	250,000	1,111,654
Total financial savings	1,300,000	2,574,613

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, tackling fraud and error, LA financing and data share. Government recently announced changes to Universal Credit, with the welcome removal of the seven waiting days and the transfer back to Housing Benefit of the rent assessment for customers residing in temporary accommodation, amongst others – detailed in the Welfare Reform report.

The Suffolk Coastal and Waveney Head of Customer Services nominated the East Suffolk Universal Credit Support Partnership, led by the Waveney District Council and ARP, to the iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards in the Reinventing Local Services Category, winning the Silver award. In this particular category, there were 39 entries with just three entrants shortlisted.

Revenues

Performance continues to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Fenland District Council, Waveney District Council, Forest Heath District Council & 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.

Further recovery work, which is partly funded by each County Council, has continued. The team have already exceeded last year's collection by £155K having collected £814K as at the end of February 2018. In addition to the monies collected by the further recovery team we also have a further £1.453 Million in secured debt by way of Charging Orders on property owned by the debtor.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well, having collected £9.3 Million since the team started of which £4 Million has been in this financial year. A fifth Enforcement Agent has recently achieved certification and is now carrying out visits. The team have also taken on collection of Housing Benefit Overpayments where other methods have been unsuccessful, with great success. As an example, an arrangement has been made to collect one particular invoice amounting to over £13K over the next three months with an initial payment of £3,253 already received. We have also had enquiries from 5 other authorities with a view to taking on their Enforcement work.

As part of the normal yearly cycle Council Tax correspondence and telephone calls hit a peak in the first half of the financial year. During the second half of the year this reduces and the team is able to bring the work up to date in time for annual billing at the end of February. This year the normal pattern occurred, however in December the trend reversed due to a number of different factors. Extra resource was brought into the team in January and staff focused on dealing with correspondence which would affect the content of the Council Tax bills for the 2018/19 financial year. At the time the annual bills were created at the end of February over 50% of the outstanding correspondence was less than one week old, 80% less than 2 weeks, with 92% less than 3 weeks old. We are currently reviewing the resource requirement within the Council Tax team.

Council Tax documentation was reviewed earlier this year. The final document to be reviewed was the Council Tax exemption notice which was completed in time for the annual billing process. As reported previously we will monitor the effectiveness of all the documents we have redesigned and amend if necessary.

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

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

Having followed up on outstanding applications we found that not all of the Government funding which is available for the new discretionary scheme has been used. This is due to several reasons including businesses who still did not return an application despite being reminded, businesses not meeting the criteria, Rateable Values decreasing, other reliefs being awarded and businesses vacating premises. We have been working with the partners to adjust schemes in order that the use of the Government funding is maximised, providing rate relief to as many businesses as possible.

Support

Annual Billing 2018 -19

This year's annual billing project commenced at the beginning of January 2018 with a full end to end testing of the software, from set up to transmission of Test Bill and Notification output to the mail provider, Critiqom Ltd. This test exercise for the seven databases, with over 340,000 Council Tax Bills alone, was completed by the System Administration Team by the first week in February, with

multi team involvement across the partnership from Benefits, Council Tax, Business Rates, Customer Services and West Suffolk ICT.

Annual Billing in the live systems commenced mid-February for Business Rates and February 21st for Council tax, Housing Benefits and Local Council Tax Reduction scheme. All the system processing was completed on schedule and transferred to Critiqom Ltd. for hand over to Royal Mail on the agreed dates during the first two weeks March.

Digital Transformation and Self Service

The 2018 Annual Billing includes in excess of 10,000 council tax payers and Housing Benefit recipients opting entirely to receive their bills and notifications electronically, rather than by traditional letter. 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.

Prior to the annual Billing, all active accounts were sent a reminder via email which included the promotion of the use of Direct Debits. However, as this was carried out just two weeks prior to billing, the additional benefit for the Anglia Revenues was gained by identifying incorrect or obsolete email addresses, giving an opportunity to clean the data prior to sending out the email notifications.