

Benefits & Fraud

Benefits performance

Benefits performance is meeting profiled targets and is on course to achieve year end targets; we continue to manage performance after filling recent vacancies with new entrants now in training and soon to be contributing to work clearance.

A successful targeted campaign work clearance day was held on the 6th June, with a high number of documents processed by all Benefits staff throughout the partnership.

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

Discussions will be taken place with Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils to support the review of Single Person Discounts, whilst Cambridgeshire have decided not to provide further funding.

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.

The table below records the excellent work of the team, on track to exceed targets for the year.

Description of financial saving	2018/19 target	Performance 1.4.18- 31.5.18
Single Person Discount fraud	500,000	205,578
Local Council Tax Support Scheme fraud	150,000	44,651
Tenancy fraud	400,000	162,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	250,000	303,066
Total financial savings	1,300,000	715,295

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 and Government grant funding 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, including latest announcements with completion now extended to March 2023 – 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.

The Strategic Manager (Benefits), along with the East Suffolk Head of Service, is presenting at the EELGA Annual Finance summit on the impact of Universal Credit and the story so far.

Revenues

Performance continues to meet targets in all areas with the exception of Non-Domestic Rates collection for Waveney District Council. The reason behind the drop in NNDR collection for Waveney DC is a refund of £600K relating to backdated mandatory charity relief. The Finance team is aware of this large refund.

Further recovery work, which is partly funded by each County Council, is continuing. The team have already collected £143K this financial year which exceeds the amount collected this time last year by £50K. In addition to the monies collected by the further recovery team we also have a further £1.507 Million in secured debt by way of Charging Orders on property owned by the debtor.

The Enforcement Team continue to perform well, having collected £10.84 Million since the team started of which £818K has been in this financial year. We are currently recruiting a sixth Enforcement Agent to provide some resilience and need to replace another Enforcement Agent who has recently left our Employment. We continue to speak to other authorities with a view to expanding the service.

As part of the normal yearly cycle Council Tax correspondence and telephone calls hit a peak in the first half of the financial year. This year additional agency staff have been in place in order to manage the increase in work and the vacancies we currently have. A review has been carried out of the resource required to deal with the levels of correspondence and telephone calls received throughout the year. OIB have recently agreed to 2.5 FTE increase in staffing on a temporary basis subject to review.

Local Authorities receive payment each year based on the number of domestic properties brought into use (new and previously empty). Each year we carry out an exercise to review all empty properties in order to maximise new homes bonus. A review form is sent to the owner of each long term empty property to establish if the property remains empty and the owner's intention with regard the property. Where requested by the Housing Teams we also include information which may help the owner bring the property back into use.

New online forms have been developed for Council Tax for customers to advise us where they change address and wish to claim a discount or exemption. As we now have the ability to design and

create our own forms we have been able to develop the change of address form as a joint Council Tax and Benefits form which will capture all information required by each service. Online forms have also been developed for Non-Domestic Rates so that ratepayers can make online applications for small business rates relief, charity relief and advise where they have moved premises.

The new rate reliefs announced by Government to assist those facing steep increases were implemented last year in respect of the three new schemes:

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

The first two reliefs have been applied to accounts for the current financial year. In respect of the new discretionary scheme, we continue to try and maximise the amount of relief awarded in respect of 2017/18 and will shortly be applying relief for the 2018/19 financial year.

The Non-Domestic Rates team currently collect amounts due for three Business Improvement Districts (Forest Heath, St Edmundsbury and Waveney). This is due to be increased to four from 1 April 2019 with the addition of a BID for the current Suffolk Coastal area and we are working with them on implementation.

Support

Digital Transformation and Self Service

Following the 2018 Annual Billing as at March 31st 2018, nearly 15,000 Council Tax payers and Housing Benefit recipients had opted 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. As this was carried out two weeks prior to billing, the additional benefit for the Anglia Revenues was gained by identifying incorrect or obsolete email addresses and the system Admin Team were able to cleanse the data prior to sending out the email notifications for E-billing.

Website

Following on from the successful re-design on the Anglia Revenues Website for Business Rates, a new design for Council Tax has now been launched. The aim of the new design is to enable the customer to access relevant information or able to complete a form in as few “clicks” as possible.

How this was done:

- 1. Identify the most common reason for accessing the website**
- 2. Design a straight forward and logical layout**

- 3. Customer Testing using specific scenarios, measuring Efficiency, Effectiveness and Usability carrying out the same scenarios on both the Old and New Websites.**
- 4. Review and collate the data**

Through the rigorous testing of the ARP Council Tax Website, the customer testing has shown to have improved significantly the efficiency, effectiveness and usability of the website.

Changes to Data Protection requirements

On May 25th 2018 new regulations with regard to Data Protection came into force with stricter rules on the use of personal data, known as General Data Protection Rules (GDPR).

The Anglia Revenues Partnership works collectively providing the administration of the statutory legal obligation for Council Tax Collection, Business Rates, Housing Benefits and Council Tax Reduction Schemes. There is an ongoing action plan in place to continue compliance with the changing legislation, particularly with regard to the ability to comply with the new rights of the individual.

Although the changes are significant for many organisations, the data collected and processed by the ARP is solely for the purposes of Revenues and Benefits. The Sharing of data is only permitted in relation to the processing of personal data provided under this legal obligation, for example to the Department of Work and Pensions.