

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL
WEST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Tuesday, 8 December 2020 at 11.00 am
Virtual Meeting via Zoom

PRESENT

Mr J.P. Cowen (Chairman)	Mr M. Cook
Mr D Ambrose Smith (Vice-Chairman)	Mrs J. French
Mrs S. Broughton	

In Attendance

Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD
Alison Chubbock	- Chief Accountant (Deputy Section 151 Officer) (BDC)
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Brian Mew	- Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Ian Smith	- Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs)
Greg Stevenson	- Service Manager (Finance & Performance)
Teresa Smith	- Democratic Services Team Leader
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

62/20 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2020 were agreed as a correct record subject to the title of Councillor Kim French (substitute Member) being changed to Miss under those recorded as present.

63/20 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Peter Catchpole, Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer (S151) for Fenland District Council and Rachael Mann, Assistant Director (Resources & Performance) for West Suffolk District Council.

Sam Anthony, Head of HR & OD for Fenland DC and Greg Stevenson, Service Manager (Finance & Performance) for West Suffolk DC were in attendance as their substitutes.

64/20 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

65/20 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None declared.

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66/20 PERFORMANCE AND SERVICE UPDATES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Stuart Philpot, the Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP presented the performance and service update report and highlighted the following areas:

Council Tax Collection

The Council Tax collection rates for all partners had reduced due to the pandemic.

Two rounds of 'soft reminders' had been sent out to customers which had had a positive effect on collections.

In October 2020, statutory reminders had been issued. Magistrate Courts had re-opened and would be in session during December and as such Court Hearings had been booked for all authorities.

Fraud and Compliance

£1.5m of fraud had been identified with the majority being due to single persons discounts non-compliance.

Business Rates Collection

All revised targets had been achieved with the exception of East Suffolk showing a £1.7m collection target shortfall. However, since the publication of the report, East Suffolk had collected a further £1.2m reducing the shortfall to £500k under collection target.

For Fenland DC refunds were still outstanding in respect of the NHS Trusts pending appeals.

The Fraud Team had assisted and had been involved with checking the due diligence in respect of the Covid-19 grants for NNDR.

Enforcement

All enforcement visits had been suspended from March to August 2020 due to the pandemic and although the collection rates had since risen, with face-to-face visits now resumed, they were not back to the levels that had been collected the previous year. The Enforcement Team were taking all the necessary precautions in respect of PPE and risk assessments.

ARP Systems and Digital

There had been a significant increase in activity on the ARP website due to the offices being closed for face-to-face visits – up to 60% compared to 2019.

A more collaborative relationship with Capita had been demonstrated recently with the implementation of Total Mobile Software to aid the visiting officers in their work.

Members were then invited to ask questions.

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Referring to fraud and compliance, Councillor French felt that the amount of fraud was quite concerning in respect of single persons discounts and asked how ARP was notified of such fraudulent activities.

In response, Members were informed that such information was captured through the Norfolk Fraud Information hub and through random checks that were carried out, but it could also be captured from notifications from neighbours, friends and even family.

Councillor French assumed that such claimants would have other people living with them and asked how many days a person was allowed to reside at the same property before the single persons discount was removed.

Adrian Mills, the Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP explained that a person had to live at the property for a substantial part of the week, any less would be classed as casual. There were checks and balances in place to eliminate such fraudulent activities.

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Ambrose-Smith referred to benefits and the Government funding of £500 that had been awarded to claimants who had to self-isolate. Within the report he had noted that the demand would outstrip the funding and asked what would happen with this going forward.

The Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP advised that the Test & Trace Self Isolation £500 payments were currently scheduled to continue until 31 January 2021; however, the Government was considering an extension to these grants until the end of March 2021. Furthermore, additional programme funding and discretionary funding to meet demand was also being considered as well as the administrative burden on local authorities in terms of coping and distributing this additional funding. Conversations were still on-going. The current demand for the Partnership areas had been at the level forecasted by the Government unlike other parts of the country where such funding had already been outstripped. It was noted that the funding was monitored weekly with the S151 Officers within the Partnership.

The Chairman was pleased that the automated services were increasing year on year.

The report was otherwise noted.

67/20 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2020-21 (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Alison Chubbock, the Chief Accountant & Deputy S151 Officer (BDC) presented the report that provided Members with a full year financial forecast against the budget.

The report had been based on information as of 31 October 2020 and showed an overspend against budget of £522k for the whole of the Partnership. This was mainly due to lost enforcement income that had been seriously affected by impact of the Covid pandemic. However, the forecast had slightly improved since the previous meeting and was moving in the right direction.

Members attention was drawn to the table on page 40 of the agenda pack. Members were assured that although the overspend was quite significant, the majority of that would be compensated from grants that the Government was

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providing to individual authorities to offset the losses from sales fees and charges income.

The appendices on pages 42 and 43 provided further detail on the main variances.

The Chairman and the Vice-Chairman thanked the Chief Accountant for such a detailed report.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

68/20 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE PARTNERSHIP BUDGET (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Chief Accountant & Deputy S151 Officer (BDC) presented the proposed budget for the whole of the Partnership for the next financial year, 2021-22. The report also included indicative future years allocations and highlighted the individual Partners' shares towards the costs.

The budget for next year was £151k lower than 2020-21, mainly due to additional income in respect of parking enforcement work – the detail behind this figure had been highlighted at paragraph 1.5 of the report.

Future budgets from 2022-23 included other efficiency targets to be achieved of £220k.

The recent spending review announced a public sector pay freeze just prior to the publication of the report. Consequently, this budget paper did not include any reduction from this potential change but with many of the Partners' on local pay schemes this would not be reflected in every single Partners' budget. It was likely that there could be a saving of approximately £40k from that pay freeze due to all Partners' making their own decisions; therefore, for next year, a small variance would be shown if that pay freeze came to fruition.

Although the enforcement income continued to be a risk, all services were continuing as normal and the budget had been based on those services as expected.

The Vice-Chairman referred to section 1.4 of the report where it mentioned new parking enforcement work would commence in 2020-21. He asked if this could be explained as he was not aware of this new service. Jo Andrews, the Strategic Manager (Revenues) ARP explained that ARP would be taking on this enforcement work in respect of parking fines for East & West Suffolk Councils. This would operate in the exact same way as council tax and business rates enforcement and an increase in fee collections and income was expected.

The Vice-Chairman also asked a question in respect of no changes being made to the budget setting going forward. The Chief Accountant (BDC) explained that this year had been used as a basis taking account of ARP's performance and continued delivery of services and was comfortable with the proposed budget going forward in such uncertain times.

Having seen the way that the ARP had delivered services during such difficult times, the Chairman felt that the Chief Accountant's assessment of this budget was correct.

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Councillor French had been very interested to hear about the new parking enforcement service. As the Portfolio Holder for Fenland DC, she had been looking into this matter and various meetings had been held and a draft report was being prepared hopefully prior to Christmas. One of the issues discussed during these meetings was how fines that had not been paid were collected and she would be very interested to have further conversations with ARP in respect of this work.

The Chairman felt that there had been much discussion at previous meetings on lessons learnt and transferring skills sets within the Partnership and this new enforcement work could clearly benefit Fenland DC. He was sure that the Strategic Manager (Revenues) ARP would be happy to assist Fenland in any way that she could.

Members were informed that Suffolk County Council delegated authority to East & West Suffolk District Councils who had their own in-house teams to manage such work. Enforcement matters then came to the ARP's Enforcement Team which all Partners would benefit from.

Paul Corney, the Head of ARP suggested that Sam Anthony, the Head of HR & Organisational Development for Fenland District Council speak to the other OIB Members from East & West Suffolk to understand exactly what process they followed that could be of some assistance.

In response, the Head of HR & Organisational Development said that she would be happy to follow that up with OIB Members.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Accountant (BDC) for an excellent report.

RESOLVED that the Partnership budget at Appendix A of the report for 2021-22 be approved.

69/20 ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN AND RISK REGISTER (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Head of ARP presented the Service Delivery Plan that should be agreed by the ARP Joint Committee by the end of December each year and the Risk Register report that had to be reviewed every six months.

Details of the 2019/20 Service Delivery Plan at section 2.1 of the report were highlighted. The Head of ARP felt this was good news, even with the pressures of Covid, ARP had been able to continue its work with the Fraud Team and Recovery Team jointly funded by County Councils and the results of this work had been surprisingly favourable. A number of objectives had been achieved and the Digital workstream had progressed which had released resources for those who could not self-serve.

The priorities of the Revenues and Benefits service were highlighted including the introduction of "Colleagues" which was linked to building talent within the organisation and ending up with an excellent workforce to be able to carry on the good work and succession planning when certain Officers reached retirement age or left the organisation.

The Chairman felt that the last point made in respect of succession planning was appropriate going forward and congratulated all Officers involved for all their hard work and for making the Members' role a great deal easier.

RESOLVED that:

- the progress in respect of the December 2019 Service Delivery plan be noted; and
- the revised Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register at Appendix B of the report be approved.

70/20 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 9)

Adrian Mills, the Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP presented the report.

Members' attention was drawn to paragraph 2.2.3 in respect of Universal Credit.

Members had taken an interest previously in DWP's contract with Citizen's Advice to help provide help to claim Universal Credit service in the current year. DWP had originally stated that a review of this contract would be forthcoming; however, as yet this had still not been completed due to the Covid pandemic and following a number of meetings no further updates had been provided.

Any information received would be shared with OIB Members followed by ARP Joint Committee Members.

It was noted that DWP had stopped the Harrogate managed migration pilot again due to Covid-19 and such plans were still on hold. However, cases where a claimants' circumstances had changed were now being accelerated from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit accordingly – this method was more challenging for customers and administratively more complex for DWP and local authorities.

As far as the spending review was concerned in terms of Universal Credit, Members were aware, as part of the DWP Covid response, had increased Universal Credit rate by £20 per week. However, the spending review had not stated whether this would be continued into the forthcoming financial year although it had been announced by the Secretary of State that it would be reviewed in time for April 2021.

Attention was then drawn to paragraph 2.3, Discretionary Housing Payment.

DWP had increased funding to offset the impact of private sector rents for this year which had been very helpful. Spend continued to be within DWP grant, and all the grant monies would be used to help customers. The main area of expenditure continued to be to assist customers with rent shortfalls, due to restrictions on Housing Benefit rent levels.

Under paragraph 2.4.3 in respect of the Benefit Cap, DWP had provided New Burdens funding to assist Councils with extra administrative costs and had increased Discretionary Housing Payment grants to help customers with the reduction in benefits that had been reduced by £6k based on the maximum family income.

Under section 3 of the report, Government had confirmed an end to the four-

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year Benefit uprating freeze from April 2020. Spending Review had announced that state pensions would increase by 2.5% protected by the triple lock, whilst benefits would increase by the September 2020 inflation rate of 0.5%.

The report was otherwise noted.

71/20 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 10)

In a response to a concern in respect of why Breckland Council was taking over the HR services in-house, away from West Suffolk Council without ARP JC Members being informed, the Head of ARP explained the reason that Members had not been made aware was due to the arrangement being between Breckland Council and West Suffolk Council in the form of a Service Level Agreement.

It was agreed that the Operational Improvement Board should discuss the new arrangement.

72/20 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 11)

Due to other commitments, it was agreed that the date of the next would be changed to either the week before or the week after 16 March 2021.

The new date would be confirmed in due course, all Members were content with it being brought forward to Tuesday, 9 March 2021 if suitable for Officers.

The Chairman took the opportunity to wish everyone a very Happy Christmas.

The meeting closed at 11.45 am

CHAIRMAN