



St Edmundsbury  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

# D200

## Cabinet 21 November 2012

### Report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership (ARP) Joint Committee: 13 September 2012

*(The following is a summary of the decisions taken by the Joint Committee. This is for information only and no decisions are required by the Cabinet.)*

*Cabinet Member:*  
Cllr David Ray

*Chairman of the Joint Committee:*  
Cllr Robert Everitt

#### 1. Health and Safety Policy

##### **RESOLVED:**

**That the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Health and Safety Policy be adopted.**

The Joint Committee considered a report which sought the adoption of a shared Health and Safety Policy within the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership (ARP). It was agreed at a previous Joint Committee meeting that ARP policies would apply to all of the partnership authorities and that all partners would be involved in the acceptance of the policies. Most policies have now been reviewed to reflect the changes within ARP following St Edmundsbury Borough Council (SEBC) joining the partnership. Until now, ARP staff have worked to their own employing Council's Health and Safety Policy. The shared Health and Safety Policy attached as Appendix A to the ARP Joint Committee report has been written to encompass the values and standards of all four partners and the circumstances within ARP.

ARP staff had recently undergone a survey to gauge how they felt a year on from expansion, with reference to work and associated stress. The Health and Safety Manager (SEBC) was working with HR Teams to analyse the responses for the production of an action plan.

## **2. Fraud**

The Joint Committee received and noted a report, the purpose of which was to inform of the Counter Fraud Activity the ARP is undertaking in order to protect the public purse against fraudulent benefit claims whilst ensuring those entitled to benefits receive their correct entitlement.

The current financial climate suggests that the Joint Committee members should be aware of the ongoing Counter Fraud Activity being undertaken to both safeguard the tax payer and lead into the Government's stated programme of Welfare Reform.

ARP is committed to preventing and detecting fraud. The Compliance Team ensures that claims for Housing and Council Tax benefit are correct and in cases where there is suspected irregularity, a thorough investigation is undertaken in accordance with relevant legislation. Where appropriate, suspected offenders are dealt with in accordance with the ARP Prosecutions Policy. The Compliance Team also undertake investigations into suspected irregularity with claims to Council Tax discounts and exemptions and any areas of suspected internal fraud.

This report details the work undertaken by the ARP Fraud and Visits Team during Quarter 1 2011/2012 and the corresponding Quarter in 2010/2011.

Appendix A attached to the Joint Committee report provided details of the performance for each of the authorities within the partnership. The performance is achieved through risk assessment of the referrals received.

For St Edmundsbury; the reported figures show a significant increase in figures. This is due to the change in software system, which meant that it was not possible to record sanction figures during the initial stages of 2011/2012. This has since been resolved and all sanctions dealt with during that period were recorded as soon as was possible. This is reflected as an increase in the recorded sanctions for St Edmundsbury during the latter part of 2011/2012.

The report included a section on the Welfare Reform Act 2012. This Act to reforms the Welfare system which including the way Benefit Fraud is investigated.

It is intended that the reform of benefit fraud will bring together the combined expertise of the Welfare Benefit Fraud investigation work undertaken by DWP, Local Authorities and HMRC, by the creation of the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS).

It is also intended that SFIS will be responsible for the investigation of all elements of fraud within the Welfare Benefits system. This will only include state benefits so local authorities will be responsible for investigation of alleged fraud, outside of this remit, including Localised Council Tax Support.

ARP will need to consider how the host authorities wish to approach the investigation of alleged fraudulent claims within the means tested Localised Council Tax Support Scheme and the other areas of suggested investigation as identified by the National Fraud Authority.

### **3. Performance Report**

The Joint Committee received and noted the draft August 2012 Performance Report.

#### *(a) Operational Performance*

There has been a massive increase in workload due to the number of changes to circumstances being received. There has been 1,700 changes to Tax Credits in August for just one authority.

There has also been a change in the way that the ARP is notified of changes by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which is now through an Automated Transfer to Local Authorities (ATLAS) system, but improvements are required to the operation of this system. A letter was being sent to the DWP outlining the issues.

On a normal day ARP deals with between six and eight hundred changes. Tax Credits are over and above that so it is a huge amount of additional work which has impacted on the time taken to process claims. This explained the increased number of red indicators in the August report.

Additional temporary staff have been brought in to try to address the problem. At their peak there had been a backlog of over 3,000 cases. Over the last four to five weeks the backlog has been reduced to 1,500 and it was hoped that things would return to normal by November 2012.

#### *(b) Financial Performance*

There is currently an under-spend of £45,000 which equates to less than one percent and Officers have been commended for managing the budget so well.

#### **4. Future Strategy**

The Joint Committee received and noted a report which sought identification of the key issues to inform the strategic review of ARP and the process timetable for completion of the review.

The Appendix to the report set out issues, including those specific to individual authorities. There has been a keenness to reflect on the strengths of the Partnership to date and a thought that it is important not to lose sight of the benefits and cost savings. However, there remains room for improvement and certain areas have been identified.

It was confirmed at the meeting that Waveney District Council and Suffolk Coastal District Council had been involved in the discussions.

The Joint Committee will be presented with options on how to move forward in the future along with recommendations at a future meeting.

#### **5. Welfare Reform**

Each Local Authority was consulting with stakeholders regarding Local Council Tax Support and consultations would continue until the end of October 2012.

There was also a consultation from the Department for Communities and Local Government regarding Local Council Tax Support and how it might affect Parishes and their funding. It now looks as if the original intention would change to a very similar funding approach to that used with Council Tax Benefit.