

Report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee: 11 June 2019

Report No:	CAB/WS/19/012	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	23 July 2019
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Sarah Broughton Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance Tel: 07929 305787 Email: sarah.broughton@westsuffolk.gov.uk	
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Key Decision: <i>(Check the appropriate box and delete all those that do not apply.)</i>	<i>Is this a Key Decision and, if so, under which definition?</i> Yes, it is a Key Decision - <input type="checkbox"/> No, it is not a Key Decision - <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> For noting only	

Wards impacted: **All Wards**

Recommendation: **The Cabinet is requested to note the content of Report No: CAB/WS/19/012, being the report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee.**

1. Purpose of the report

1.1 On 11 June 2019, the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership (ARP) Joint Committee considered the following substantive items of business:

1. Governance and Reporting Arrangements relating to Internal Audit;
2. Performance Reports:
 - a. Joint Committee Performance Report April 2019;
 - b. Presentation of Data Q4 Final 2018/2019;
 - c. ARP Financial Outturn 2018/2019;
3. Service Plan and Risk Update;
4. Welfare Reform Update; and
5. Forthcoming Issues.

This report is for information only. No decisions are required by the Cabinet.

2. Key Issues

2.1 **Performance Reports: Joint Committee Performance Report April 2019, Presentation of Data Q4 Final 2018/2019 and ARP Financial Outturn (Agenda Items 8a, 8b and 8c)**

2.1.1 a. Joint Committee Performance Report April 2019

As resolved at the previous meeting of the Joint Committee in March 2019, Members were presented with a new style Performance Report.

The new design provides relevant information relating to the performance of ARP as a whole and that of the individual partners. This detailed report can be viewed on Breckland District Council's website at the following link:

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/s53020/Performance%20Report%20QTR%201%202019%20V1%20-%20April%2019.pdf>

The report indicated that when considering performance as a whole for all partner councils, all targets as at April 2019 were currently being met in respect of the following categories:

- Business rates collection
- Council tax collection
- Number of electronic forms received
- Fraud and compliance

2.1.2 In respect of West Suffolk Council's individual performance, all targets as at April 2019 were currently being met in respect of the following categories:

- Business rates collection
- Council tax collection
- Local council tax reduction
- Housing benefit
- Fraud and compliance



The Joint Committee noted however, that whilst the indicators for Local Council Tax Reduction and Housing Benefit had been met for April, due to the three week downtime in April associated with the merging of the former Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury systems, the target may not be met for the first quarter of the year. Work is being undertaken to recover the position and cases are being targeted to minimise customer impact. The annual target is expected to be met at the end of the year.

2.1.3 Attention was drawn to the service updates as at 30 April 2019:

- i. Enforcement. The Enforcement Team continue to perform well, having collected £16.157 million since the team started of which £5.669 million has been in the last financial year. The team has collected £527k in April 2019.
- ii. Further recovery. The Further Recovery Team had their best year for collection in 2018/19 collecting £1,111,595 exceeding the amount collected in 2017/18 by £203k. In addition to the monies collected by the Further Recovery Team, a further £1.776 million in secured debt by way of Charging Orders on property owned by the debtor is also obtained. £83k has so far been collected in April 2019.
- iii. Benefits. Benefits performance has been affected by the merging of systems for East Suffolk Council and West Suffolk Council in April 2019, as explained in 2.1.2 above; however the end of year targets are aimed to be achieved.
- iv. Fraud and Compliance. Whilst Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils currently continue to support the review of Single Persons Discounts, Cambridgeshire CC (CCC) had ceased providing further funding from April 2019. ARP had provided a briefing note to East Cambs and Fenland District Councils to aid discussions with CCC regarding the implications of this.
- v. Annual Billing. The 2019/2020 annual billing process was completed as planned with all bills and notifications sent out on time. The sign-up to online self-service accounts for council tax payers and housing benefit recipients now exceeds 18,000 account holders and is continuing to rise each month. This, amongst other benefits, has helped to reduce paper use and postal costs to the partnership as more and more customers were now opting to receive their bills and notifications electronically.
- vi. ARP Website. The website has been enhanced to try and make it as straight forward as possible for customer use. This approach has been implemented for requests associated with council tax, business rates and housing benefit. Analysis has demonstrated that this has been particularly effective for customers utilising the self-serve facilities.
- vii. Customer Services Survey. Following consultation with the Customer Service Teams, a new shared ARP satisfaction survey has been trialled with encouraging initial results. Of the 841 surveys undertaken to date, 92% rated 4 out of 5 stars for satisfaction. Other findings from the initial survey are provided in the report (via the link above).

2.1.4 Discussion was specifically held at the meeting on the following topics:

- i. Whether there were time limits for making business rate appeals and the impact such appeals were having on local authorities. As was the

case with doctors' surgeries which had had a significant impact on local authorities through successful appeals, a reassessment of whether hospitals could claim business rate relief was ongoing. The partners were making provision for this in the event it should happen.

The next business rates revaluation was expected in 2021, followed by a subsequent revaluation in 2024.

Renewable energy infrastructure should also be considered as potentially having a significant impact on business rate collection. It was however, noted that when local infrastructure became national infrastructure, the business rates collected in association with this would be lost, therefore, this would need to be taken into account as part of local authorities' budget setting processes.

- ii. The point at which possession came into effect following the issuing of Charging Orders (see 2.1.3 (ii) above). Members were informed that a sale of a property could be enforced and during this period the debt could still be collected. Arrangements for the debt were put in place and in the majority of cases this was successfully collected. Possession was always a last resort.

2.1.5 b. Presentation of Data Q4 Final 2018/2019

This report provides relevant information relating to the performance of ARP as a whole and that of the individual partners for the full 2018/2019 year up to 31 March 2019. This detailed report can be viewed on Breckland District Council's website at the following link:

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/s53021/Presentation%20of%20Data%20Q4%20FINAL%2018-19.pdf>

The report indicated that when considering performance as a whole for all partner councils, all targets as at 31 March 2019 had been met in respect of the following categories:

- Business rates collection
- Council tax collection
- Number of electronic forms received
- Fraud and compliance

2.1.6 In respect of the former Forest Heath District and St Edmundsbury Borough Councils' individual performances, all annual targets for 2018/2019 as at 31 March 2019 had been met in respect of the following categories:

- Business rates collection
- Council tax collection
- Local council tax reduction
- Housing benefit
- Fraud and compliance



2.1.7 c. ARP Financial Outturn 2018/2019

The Joint Committee **noted** the final financial outturn position for 2018/2019, which showed an underspend of £91k overall (1% of the net budget). Appendix A attached to that report provided further details, together with details and reasons for the specific variances.

The efficiency target for 2018/2019 had now been fully achieved.

An update had also been provided on committed expenditure for the Transformation Programme. The committed transformation funding was £200,409 as at 31 March 2019. £100,409 is expected to be spent by the end of 2019/2020. A balance of £100,000 includes the top up from other reserves for unallocated projects yet to be determined.

Details of the funding held in the ARP ICT reserve, which had been approved as part of the budget setting process, was also contained in Appendix A. This reserve (which following a spend of £32,000 in 2018/19, will now amount to a total of £234,428 by 2020/2021) has been established to cover costs of ICT replacement in future years.

The reasons for other specific variances, together with other details including the distribution of the 2018/19 £91k surplus back to the partner authorities, are contained in the report at:

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/s53018/ARP%20Financial%20Out-turn%202018-19.pdf>

Appendix A:

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/s53019/Appendix%20A%20for%20ARP%20Financial%20Out-turn%202018-19.pdf>

2.2 **Service Plan and Risk Update (Agenda Item 9)**

2.2.1 The Joint Committee considered a report, which sought approval for the revised Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register, as set out in the appendices attached to that report at:

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/s53022/Joint%20Committee%20Service%20Plan%20update%20and%20risk%20report.pdf>

Appendix A

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/s53024/JointCommitteeServiceDeliveryPlanUpdatedMay19.pdf>

The Joint Committee noted that ARP had seen significant success in the last year since the Service Delivery Plan (Transformation Programme) was approved in December 2018, including (briefly):

- housing benefit new claims and changes exceeded targets;
- all partner councils have successfully moved to Universal Credit full service;

- all customer teams are able to access customer contact software to sign customers up to e-services upon contact;
- the further recovery work jointly funded by Norfolk/Suffolk County Councils secured recovery of over £1.1 million in 2018/19;
- the Fraud Team's work, which is also jointly funded by the County Councils identified just under £2.75 million in fraud and error;
- the Enforcement Agency had a surplus of over £720,000 whilst providing a more sympathetic service to debtors; and
- the merge of databases for East Suffolk (former Waveney and Suffolk Coastal) and West Suffolk (former Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury) has been completed for all revenues and benefits systems.

Other achievements relating to the Transformation Programme are detailed in the report presented to the Joint Committee, which relate to:

- the shared management arrangement with Norwich City Council has been successful to date, which has been extended to include the provision of fraud services (jointly funded by Norfolk County Council). From 1 July 2019, NCC's enforcement work will also be handled by ARP;
- the completion of the redesign of the ARP website;
- the progression of the Digital Transformation work stream;
- the redesigning of customer message delivery utilising 'nudge' techniques; and
- the Service Delivery Plan sought to deliver efficiencies to the partner councils of £531,000 in 2017/18, increasing to over £1 million, which was achieved.

2.2.2 Following approval by the Joint Committee in September 2017, the Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register have been revised to accommodate the reconsidered strategic direction of ARP, in accordance with the following strategic priorities:

- Not to lose focus on its core business
- To endeavour to influence DWP and other Government Departments
- To continue to promote specialist services
- To develop its existing offer

2.2.3 The revised Plan seeks to detail actions to achieve the vision detailed to Members in 2017. In 2019/20, emphasis will be to:

- continue to be on driving customer cultural change through digital transformation by assisting customers with the use of online services to reduce future footfall and telephone calls;
- continue to influence national initiatives such as Universal Credit and influence system design to improve performance and generate efficiencies where possible; and
- ensure appropriate actions continue to be put in place to enable the challenges and financial impact of the fundamental changes regarding welfare reform to be suitably handled and monitored.

2.2.4 The Joint Committee also considered the Partnership's Risk Register. The risk surrounding income from business rates presently remains red because there

remains a risk in relation to subsequent appeals that may be received and reduce rates payable. The Register also continues to highlight the need to monitor the impact of Universal Credit on customers and grant income.

2.2.5 The risk relating to housing benefit subsidy has been reduced, as discussed with the Joint Committee, because the hard work of the teams in managing the risk means that no loss of subsidy has been incurred for a number of years.

2.2.6 The register also continues to highlight the need to monitor the impact of Universal Credit.

2.2.7 The merge of databases for East and West Suffolk Councils has been successfully implemented, therefore this risk has been removed from the register.

2.2.8 The Joint Committee **RESOLVED that:**

- 1. the progress in respect of the December 2018 Service Delivery Plan be noted; and**
- 2. the revised Service Delivery Plan and Service Register at Appendix A of the report be noted.**

2.3 **Welfare Reform Update (Agenda Item 10)**

2.3.1 The Joint Committee received and **noted** an update on welfare reform, which included:

a. **Universal Credit (UC):**

From 1 April 2019, the DWP awarded a 12 month funding contract to Citizens' Advice to provide help to new Universal Credit customers to make a claim (Assisted Digital Support) and to help customers with budget monthly payments (Personal Budgeting Support). Having met with various Citizens' Advice branches across Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, ARP has established that the following arrangements are being implemented:

- Local advisors will dial into a national call centre.
- Web chat will be provided.
- Face to face arrangements will be in place – some on an appointment basis, others on a drop in basis or a mixture of the two. Rural provision may be patchy.
- Thetford and Diss Citizens' Advice are trialling the new service from January 2020.
- The help to claim service is funded to the point of first payment only.

ARP has raised concerns that Citizens' Advice are only funded to help to the first UC payment received; however, Citizens' Advice have said they will continue to help vulnerable customers, drawing on their usual funding streams. Through regular liaison meetings ARP will monitor this.



The summary of the latest position on the expansion of UC and concerns raised by officers regarding specific issues in respect of the expansion on a national level were contained in sections 2.1.8 and 2.1.9 of the report, and which were duly noted by the Joint Committee.

- b. **Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP):** Spend continues to be within the grant provided by the DWP, and is forecast to be closer to the limit, but within the grant. This grant is designed to help customers remain in their homes or to move to affordable and sustainable accommodation. The main area of expenditure continues to be to assist customers with rent shortfalls, in particular due to restrictions on Housing Benefit rent levels. In response to a question at the meeting, Members were informed that if the DHP grant was not fully spent in any given year, the authority could not retain or carry forward any underspend. For 2018/19 ARP had achieved a near full spend.
- c. **Benefit Cap:** In November 2016, the maximum family income before the Benefit Cap applies reduced from £26,000 to £20,000 (£13,400 for single adults with no children). The Benefit Service continues to work with colleagues in Customer Service and Housing Options teams to seek to avoid homelessness and the cost of temporary housing.

DWP has provided New Burdens funding to assist councils with extra administrative costs and have increased Discretionary Housing Payment grants to help customers with the reduction; however, it should be noted that the increase does not cover all reductions.

- d. **Social Rented Sector Rent Restrictions:** The Government has responded to consultation on funding for supported housing and it has indicated it will not implement Local Housing Allowance rates in social housing. Supported accommodation, including hostel tenancies will remain in Housing Benefit and will not therefore move to Universal Credit.

2.4 Forthcoming Issues (Agenda Item 11)

- 2.4.1 Discussion was held on the revised Terms of Reference and structure of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee. The Partnership Agreement was due to be reviewed by the Joint Committee in autumn 2019.

3. Minutes

- 3.1 For further information on the discussions held at the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee meeting on 11 June 2019, the draft minutes of the meeting may be viewed on Breckland District Council's website at the following link:

<https://democracy.breckland.gov.uk/documents/g4494/Public%20minutes%2011th-Jun-2019%2010.30%20Anglia%20Revenues%20and%20Benefits%20Partnership%20Joint%20Committee.pdf?T=11>

4. Background papers

Breckland DC Website:

[11 June 2019](#)

