

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, 9 March 2021 at 11.00 am
Virtual meeting via Zoom

THIS MEETING IS IN LINE WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND POLICE AND CRIME PANELS (CORONAVIRUS) (FLEXIBILITY OF LOCAL AUTHORITY AND POLICE AND CRIME PANEL MEETINGS) (ENGLAND AND WALES) REGULATIONS 2020

PRESENT

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

In Attendance

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

1/21 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

2/21 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

None.

3/21 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

4/21 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None declared.

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5/21 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Stuart Philpot, the Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP presented the report.

Business Rates:

Targets had been amended to reflect the grants received in respect of the rate reliefs received by Government. Jo Andrews, Strategic Revenues Manager advised that East Suffolk was no longer behind target.

Council Tax:

Council Tax was currently under target due to the many changes and the affect that the pandemic was having on residents in respect of hardship, and as well as not being able to recover outstanding amounts through the Magistrates Courts until recently, had affected the ability to collect. These targets were expected to improve going forward.

Fraud:

The Partnership had continued to identify significant amounts of attempted fraud particularly in respect of the single person discount which had increased since the previous meeting.

Enforcement:

Visits had re-started in August 2020 but again the pandemic restrictions had affected the Teams ability to engage with customers and as a subsequence there had been a significant drop in the amount of collections carried out by the Enforcement Team.

The Strategic Revenues Manager advised that the Team had tried to make extended arrangements with customers and were back out visiting but obviously there were still restrictions in place in terms of going into people's homes.

Non-Domestic Rates:

The Team had an increased workload over the first two months of this year due to the additional rate reliefs to be awarded and the payment of grants to businesses.

Council Tax:

351,000 Council Tax bills had been produced by an external mail company and were now 'hitting the mats' in East Cambridgeshire and Fenland. West Suffolk DC in respect of e-billing should be with their customers in the next 48 hours.

The Strategic Manager (Support Services) had been pleased with the progress thus far with the bills and with the e-billing option of just under 24,000 residents.

Councillor Broughton asked how e-billing was being promoted. Members were informed that this was being promoted by the Customer Services Team

Action By

which formed part of the Customer Services Strategy Group; however, it was a slow process and the reasons for this was explained.

Paul Corney, the Head of ARP explained that the other factor linked to the lack of take up of e-billing was the very nature of Council Tax bills as customers only took notice of them once a year. The Customer Services Strategy Group was already looking at other ways to attract more e-billing customers by linking systems as East Suffolk already had.

The Chairman asked if there were any barriers to prevent this happening. Members were informed that not all Councils had 'CRM' software, and therefore was dependent on how each of them took such matters forward but this was being looked at.

The Chairman was pleased that all the partner authorities were aware of the opportunity and that the various IT Teams were being briefed on this approach but asked for an update to be brought to the next meeting or to the pre-meeting to establish how all partners were either migrating services to a new platform or utilising existing platforms in respect of single point of contact.

Members agreed as this could potentially create substantial cost savings.

It was further agreed that a target would be included.

The Vice-Chairman felt that June was too soon for the Head of ARP to pull such information together and suggested that it be brought to the September pre-meeting instead.

It was agreed that an update would be provided at the September pre-meeting.

Referring to the Performance report itself, the Chairman asked for an update on the court case in respect of Fenland's business rates collection that was now being appealed by the NHS, and whether this would have an impact across other authorities. The Strategic Revenues Manager advised that the appeal was still on-going and would primarily affect West Suffolk, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Councils.

The Chairman asked why Fenland's target was shown 'red' but not the others. Members were informed that Fenland was marked 'red' due it being last year's collection rates, the current year was on target.

The Performance report was otherwise noted.

Stuart Philpot, the Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP was leaving at the end of March and the Head of ARP thanked him for all the years he had worked for the Partnership and the fantastic service that he had provided.

The Chairman totally endorsed the above comments and also conveyed his thanks to Jo Andrews, Strategic Revenues Manager who would be taking early retirement very soon.

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

In the Chief Accountant's absence, the Head of ARP presented the report.

Action By

This report had been based on information as of 31 January 2021 and showed an estimated overspend against budget of £492k for the whole of the partnership. This had mainly been due to the loss of enforcement income as discussed earlier in the meeting due to the pandemic restrictions. However, this would be offset by the income compensation scheme that the Government had introduced.

Authorities were expected to absorb the initial 5% of lost income against budget and after that the grant would provide 75p in every £ of lost income. The lost Enforcement income would be claimed under this scheme for each partner as shown in the table at section 1.4 of the report.

Members' attention was then drawn to Appendix A of the report, the details of which were explained.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

7/21 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK 2021 (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Strategic Revenues Manager presented the report.

In 2019, a consultancy exercise had been carried out to look at performance governance. There was a great deal of data, but a consistent approach was needed to report against agreed targets. Each Team had looked at their own objectives against strategic priorities and the critical success factors had been identified.

The Customer Services Team had reviewed and considered the targets and measures and it had been found that other measures would need to be included such as avoidable customer contact.

The data would be displayed on dashboards and would provide a visual way of recording performance and were being constructed so that as much as possible each Authority would be able to see their own data and that of the other partners. The dashboards would be a "living" document and new indicators and information could be added (or removed) when required. If set up in this way there would be less resource required to produce performance data.

Appendix B of the report highlighted the suggested targets and measures, and dashboards would be developed along each strategic priority. The process was explained.

In respect of e-billing sign up, the current target had been set at 10% which would be in the region of 36,000 customers.

The Chairman referred to page 48 of the agenda pack under heading Performance Management roles that contained the annual plans and strategies and asked if there should be a mid-year review given everything that had been happening in the last 12 months.

The Vice-Chairman agreed with the above suggestion and felt that it this should be looked at more than once a year.

The Head of ARP thought it was a good idea but asked for more information as to what Members actually wanted to see in the review. The Chairman felt

Action By

that the approval of ARP plans and strategies should be reviewed every six months as everything had been fundamentally different over the last year and were going to be different again going forward. It was not just the pandemic that was creating this change, but it was also about the forthcoming agenda item that had yet to be discussed that was also going to drive change.

The Head of ARP agreed and felt that it would make entire sense to provide a Service Delivery Plan and Performance update every quarter if preferred.

Not to create work for the sake of it, and if appropriate, it was agreed that a Service Delivery Plan would be brought to the meeting in June alongside the Risk Register and the Performance updates would continue to be provided quarterly. The format of how these matters would be brought forward would be discussed and agreed off-line.

Subject to the above, it was,

RESOLVED that:

- the indicators identified, targets, tolerance levels and level of reporting be agreed; and
- the use of the Dashboard be approved.

At this stage, the Chairman thanked Jo Andrews and Stuart Philpot for everything they had done for the partnership. Their time and effort and their quality of their work had been thoroughly appreciated. Both were invited to remain in the meeting until the end of the agenda.

8/21 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 8)

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

The four matters of interest were highlighted as follows:

Universal Credit

Referring to paragraph 2.18, Members had always shown an interest in DWP's approach to helping people to claim Universal Credit. This was the second year that this service had been contracted to the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) but frustratingly, DWP had not confirmed its plans for the forthcoming imminent financial year arrangements. ARP had been led to believe that the service would be continued with the CAB for 2021/22 and that there would be further a review. DWP had noted all concerns raised.

Members' attention was then drawn to section 2.2.3 of the report (3rd bullet point). The £20 uplift in Universal Credit had been extended for the first six months of the forthcoming financial year. Customers who received Council Tax support would continue to receive the full benefit of that uplift until the end of September 2021.

Welfare Benefit Up-rating April 2021

From April 2021 all benefits would increase by the September 2020 CPI inflation measure which was 0.5% with the exception of the State Pension which was due to increase by 2.5% due to the 'triple lock' (lower of CPI inflation, average earnings or 2.5%).

Action By

The report was otherwise noted.

9/21 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 9)

No issues arising.

10/21 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Chairman advised that there was some debate as to whether or not meetings were going to continue to be held virtually or in public/face to face after 21 June 2021. Further clarification was still being sought by the LGA.

The Vice-Chairman said that he would prefer to carry on with virtual meetings as it saved time and travel. He suggested face to face meetings once a year going forward.

Councillor Broughton concurred with the above comments as she felt that these virtual meetings had worked well and most people were now used to Zoom.

In the interim, the next meeting on Tuesday, 22 June 2021 at 11am was noted. Members would be informed of whether this meeting would be held virtually or face to face once the arrangements had been confirmed by Government.

A Member Briefing would be held at 10am prior to the meeting.

11/21 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 11)

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1, 2, 3 & 4 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Act.

12/21 RISK BASED VERIFICATION (RBV) POLICY REVIEW AND VERIFICATION POLICY 2021-2022 (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) presented the annual report.

Members were being asked to note the Risk Based Verification Policy for 2020/21 as unchanged and to approve its replacement with a Verification Policy from April 2021.

The two major drivers for this initiative were highlighted and the table at Appendix A was explained.

RESOLVED that:

- the Risk Based Verification (RBV) policy remains unchanged in 2020/21; and
- the Anglia Revenues Partnership Joint Committee approves the replacement of RBV with a Verification Policy for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims from April 2021 for Breckland Council,

Action By

East Cambridgeshire District Council, East Suffolk Council, Fenland District Council and West Suffolk Council.

13/21 SUCCESSION PLANNING (AGENDA ITEM 13)

Before the report was discussed and on behalf of all the partner Councils, the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and the Head of ARP said a few words in respect of Stuart Philpot, the Strategic Manager (Support Services) and Jo Andrews, the Strategic Manager (Revenues), who would be leaving the Partnership shortly and thanked them both for their help and support over the years and wished them well for the future.

Stuart Philpot thanked everyone for their kind words he had thoroughly enjoyed working for the Partnership over the last 7 years and paid particular thanks to Paul Corney who had been a fantastic boss and felt that he would not have achieved his position without him.

Jo Andrews thanked everyone for their kind words.

At this point, the Strategic Manager (Revenues), the Strategic Manager (Support Services) and the Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) left the meeting.

The Head of ARP informed Members that he would be taking early retirement too in the near future, and this was one of the reasons for the succession planning report.

The Service Delivery Plan (Appendix A) had included "Leadership and Succession Planning" as an action since December 2019. For the continuation of services and to secure efficiencies, the Operational Improvement Board and the ARP Senior Management Team had been reviewing and discussing plans to consider key roles in the ARP establishment that could produce skills gaps were people to leave the organisation.

The suggested interim and future arrangements were then explained in great detail.

The Vice-Chairman was very pleased with the proposed arrangements but asked if it would be the OIB or the Joint Committee who would be appointing/interviewing the new Head of ARP as he felt that Members should have some input.

The Head of ARP reminded Members of the process when he was appointed but would find out if the same procedure remained.

Brian Mew, the Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer for East Suffolk DC stated that appointments such as these had to be in accordance with the employing authorities.

Rachel Mann, the Assistant Director (Resources & Performance) (West Suffolk) provided Members with a number of suggestions and felt that there would be a role for Members in the appointment process.

Members felt that this was a very comprehensive report and totally endorsed all the points that had been made.

Action By

RESOLVED that the recommendations as listed in the report be approved.

It was agreed that the appointment process for the Head of ARP would be investigated and confirmed in due course.

The Chairman thanked the Head of ARP for all the hard work that he had done and for all the hard work ahead.

The meeting closed at 12.20 pm

CHAIRMAN