

SHARED REVENUES PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

MINUTES

WEDNESDAY 29TH JANUARY 2020

GIPPING ROOM, GRAFTON HOUSE

4.00 PM

Present: Councillors J Osborne, S Meudec, B Rudkin and J Fleming (Substitute)

22. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Morley and Whitehead. Councillor Fleming was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor Morley.

23. Unconfirmed Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 September 2019

It was RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2019 be signed as a true record.

24. To Confirm or Vary the Order of Business

It was RESOLVED:

that the Order of Business be as printed on the agenda.

25. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

26. SRP/19/07 Shared Revenues Partnership - Service Report

26.1 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support, Amy Mayes, explained that the performance of the benefits team continued to improve, despite staff numbers being reduced in anticipation of reduced demand as

Universal Credit was rolled out. The caseload had reduced slightly through the year, but until managed migration took place there was unlikely to be a significant reduction in the number of cases the team dealt with as the volume of changes of circumstances continued to be significant.

- 26.2 The level of Local Authority Error in both Mid-Suffolk and Ipswich was now below the threshold which was expected to allow funding of overpayments by the Department for Work and Pensions. The Local Authority Error rate for Babergh remained above target as a result of an issue identified early in the financial year. It was unlikely that it would fall below the threshold during the remainder of the financial year.
- 26.3 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support reported that Ipswich and Mid-Suffolk District Councils had allocated 73% and 77% of their Discretionary Housing Payments Grants, whilst Babergh had only allocated 52% of its grant in the year to date. The Shared Revenues Partnership was committed to applying the full grant to help those with rent shortfall and, to that end, had held a meeting with housing officers to identify any tenants who could be invited to make applications to assist or to help facilitate moves.
- 26.4 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that had also been a reduction in the number of claims for Council Tax Reduction since Universal Credit had been introduced. This was because previously applications were being made for Housing Benefit and these were joint applications for Council Tax Reduction. From April 2020, Universal Credit Claim notifications would be considered as an ‘intention to claim’ Council Tax Reduction, which would reduce the number of customers who lost entitlement from delays in claiming.
- 26.5 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that the new online Benefits Landlord Portal was saving approximately 700 letters per week from being sent. The deletion of data under the GDPR Connect and Data Protection Compliance scheme was still taking place manually as a result of a software issue which the Council’s supplier was working to resolve. Benefits e-Forms had been successfully integrated which would deliver a saving of £20,000 per annum.
- 26.6 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support reported that there was no update on Welfare Reform as there had been no significant changes. The results from the pilot in managed migration in Harrogate were expected in September 2020.
- 26.7 Councillor Meudec asked whether other partners would be affected by the higher level of Local Authority Error in Babergh. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support confirmed that each Council’s level of error was calculated separately and so the value of the overpayments in Mid-Suffolk and Ipswich were unaffected.
- 26.8 Councillor Meudec asked whether the Department for Work and Pensions could introduce a trigger into the Universal Credit system to automatically start

- a Council Tax Reduction claim. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained whilst the Department for Work and Pensions would not set this trigger the local Council Tax Reduction scheme allowed the Shared Revenues Partnership to decide what could be treated as a claim. The practical arrangements were being made so that the Shared Revenues Partnership could accept notifications of Universal Credit claims as Council Tax Reduction Claims.
- 26.9 Councillor Osborne asked how residents were made aware of the availability of discretionary housing payments. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that various mechanisms had been set up so that if someone was identified as being likely to be eligible they would be invited to apply. There were however quite a few restrictions on who might be eligible as if benefits already covered the full eligible rent no further assistance could be offered. Councillor Osborne asked that a list of circumstances where someone might be eligible be circulated to Councillors. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support agreed to share the details with members of the Joint Committee.
- 26.10 Councillor Fleming asked why there had been a significant number of overpayments in April 2019. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that a systemic issue had been identified which had led to a significant number of overpayments being recorded in that month.
- 26.11 The Operations Manager – Revenues, Andrew Wilcock, explained that the Council Tax collection rate was slightly down on 2018/19, although this was mostly due to debt being re-profiled rather than non-payment. The significant increase in the number of people paying over 12 months rather than 10 had contributed to the reduction in the rate of collection. The review of Single Person Discounts had continued for 2019/20 and as a result of the project 629 discounts had been removed and £220,252 of Council Tax had been re-billed.
- 26.12 The Operations Manager – Revenues, reported that there were no serious concerns in relation to the collection of Business Rates. A large number of appeals from the 2010 rating list were still outstanding and only a very low number of appeals had so far been received in relation to the 2017 rating list so there remained a significant risk which justified the independently assessed appeals provisions held for each Council.
- 26.13 Councillor Meudec asked whether the Business Rates Retail Discount had reduced the amount of businesses which did not pay their Business Rates. The Operations Manager – Revenues confirmed that the number of businesses where recovery action needed to be taken had reduced, however, there remained a problem with larger retail businesses.
- 26.14 The Operations Manager – Revenues, reported that more than 50% of notifications of address changes in relation to Council Tax were now through the online portal which fed directly into the back office systems, and as a result of this increased efficiency Council Tax staff were able to deal with an increased caseload without additional staff.

- 26.15 The Operations Manager – Revenues, explained that the take-up of electronic billing in Ipswich had now reached 5%, with the take up in Babergh and Mid-Suffolk Districts being just over 4%. Work to make the paper and electronic bills look more similar was ongoing as this had been raised as a reason some residents didn't want to take up electronic billing.
- 26.16 Councillor Osborne asked whether a solution to paper bills continuing to be sent to partners of individuals who had signed up for electronic billing had been found. The Operations Manager – Revenues confirmed that this had been resolved. Councillor Fleming asked whether the 'Donate a Tree' scheme would be used to help with the promotion of electronic billing. The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that it was planned to promote this scheme across all three Councils but that the details were still being worked out. Councillors noted the potential difficulty of finding appropriate locations for trees, especially in Ipswich.
- 26.17 The Head of Finance and Revenues, John Chance, explained that the Shared Revenues Partnership had exceeded its transitional vacancy target for the year and that an underspend of £37k was anticipated. It was also proposed that some unused grants, totalling £395,780, be returned to partner Councils, and despite the return of these grants a reserve of £562,330 was expected to be carried forward, which was considered to be a prudent level.
- 26.18 The Head of Finance and Revenues explained that the 2020/21 SRP budget had been calculated that the contributions required from Babergh and Mid-Suffolk District Councils would reduce, whilst the contributions required from Ipswich would increase by just £870.

It was RESOLVED:

- a) **that the 2020/21 budget and partners contributions, as documented in section 9.12 of the report, be approved;**
Reason: The SRP Partnership Agreement states that the Section 151 Officers of the Partner Councils will consider budget requirement for the following year accounting for changes in caseload, work demand and performance projections.
- b) **that the carry forward of the SRP reserve / underspend from 2019/20 into the financial year 2020/21 be approved;**
Reason: To fund unexpected costs, uncertainties and invest to save schemes. £50k of reserve is earmarked for equipment replacement.
- c) **that the return of £395.78k of grants to partnering authorities be approved;**
Reason: The grants have not been utilised, the return of the money would assist the partnering authorities and reduce the potential SRP underspend / reserve balance.

- d) that the SRP Joint Committee approve the inclusion in the SRP Partnership agreement of an amendment which allows for the repayment of unutilised grants back to the Partnering Authorities.

Reason: To establish a compliant and simpler process for any future refunds / repayments that may occur.

27. SRP/19/08 Forward Plan

It was RESOLVED:

that the Forward Plan be noted.

28. Exclusion of Public

It was RESOLVED:

that the public (including the Press) be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the remaining items under Regulation 21 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulation 2000 as it was likely that if members of the public were present during this item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information falling within paragraphs 1, 4 and 5 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

29. **Unconfirmed Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 September 2019**

30. **SRP/19/09 Revenues Update**

The meeting closed at 4.45 pm

Chair