

SHARED REVENUES PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

MINUTES

**WEDNESDAY 10TH JULY 2019
GIPPING ROOM, GRAFTON HOUSE
4.00 PM**

Present: Councillors S Meudec, J Osborne, M Cook (Substitute), D Davis and S Morley

1. Election of Chair

It was RESOLVED:

that Councillor J Osborne be elected as Chair of the Shared Revenues Partnership Joint Committee for the municipal year 2019/20.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair

It was RESOLVED:

that Councillor S Meudec be appointed as Vice-Chair of the Shared Revenues Partnership Joint Committee for the municipal year 2019/20.

3. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Whitehead and Rudkin. Councillor Cook was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor Rudkin.

4. Unconfirmed Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 March 2019

It was RESOLVED:

that the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2019 be signed as a true record.

5. To Confirm or Vary the Order of Business

It was RESOLVED:

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

6. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

7. Dates and Times of Meetings - all to be held at 4.00pm

It was RESOLVED:

that the dates and times of meetings be confirmed as printed on the agenda.

8. SRP/19/01 Shared Revenues Partnership - Service Report

- 8.1 The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support, Amy Mayes, explained that the Shared Revenues Partnership service report layout had been amended to provide more relevant information.
- 8.2 The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that there had been an increase in the number of changes in circumstances but that officers had continued to process these very promptly. There had been an increase in the Local Authority Error level but the cause of this had been investigated and an action plan implemented to bring the error level back below target and the government threshold level. A proportion of the error currently identified as Local Authority Error was likely to be re-categorised as Department for Work and Pensions Error as a result of the investigation findings.
- 8.3 The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support noted that Discretionary Housing Payments continued to be a difficult area, with all three partner authorities again receiving a lower grant than in the previous year. Shared Revenues Partnership officers were working with housing option teams to provide the best support possible to households. The number of Housing Benefits cases continued to generally decrease slowly, although there had been an increase in Ipswich in May 2019. This decrease in caseload was balanced by the increase in changes of circumstance.
- 8.4 The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support reported that increased use of e-Forms had increased efficiency in the office and also benefitted customers by giving them a faster response.
- 8.5 Councillor Meudec asked whether there was any explanation as to why the grant for Discretionary Housing Payments to Ipswich Borough Council had fallen by c.£40,000. The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that the grants had been calculated in the Government's last 5-year Spending Review and were based on forecast estimates.

- 8.6 Councillor Cook asked whether there had been a common root cause for issues driving the increase in Local Authority Error. The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that automation of ATLAS data from the Department for Work and Pensions had resulted in some incomes being miscommunicated as 'information only' which had affected entitlement for a small number of customers. The Shared Revenues Partnership had then analysed all cases to identify any other customers where that type of automation could have lead to entitlement error and corrected them. The corresponding overpayments, whilst inflating Local Authority Error, would not be passed on to customers and would, in part, be reclassified. Whilst extensive acceptance testing had been undertaken at the point of introduction, officers weren't able to routinely check the quality of all information being provided by the automation routine. However, this process had been reviewed and, by reverting specific types of notification to manual processes, repeats of this automation error could be prevented.
- 8.7 Councillor Cook asked whether there had been any issues with claimants inputting incorrect data into electronic forms. The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support noted that there were cases of error on both electronic and paper forms, however, the issue which most residents had was identifying which Benefit to claim – Housing Benefit or Universal Credit. An intelligent claim form had therefore been set up to guide residents. Councillor Cook asked whether Councils could be confident that this triage form guided residents to claim everything they were eligible for. The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that the Calculator suggested what could be claimed for but that the Council also did lots of other work, for example with those who might be supporting potential claimants, to build awareness of eligibility. The most likely benefit not to be claimed was Council Tax Reduction and the Council Tax Recovery Team signposted those struggling to pay towards this scheme.
- 8.8 Councillor Osborne asked whether there was any financial incentive to process new claims and changes of circumstance quickly. The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that there was no financial incentive from the Department for Work and Pensions but said that the current target seemed appropriate to provide a good level of service.
- 8.9 Councillor Osborne commented that the performance of the Shared Revenues Partnership was very good and thanked officers for their hard work.
- 8.10 The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that SRP was looking to replace the current Benefits Landlord Portal with a more advanced system which would allow electronic communication with landlords. Systems improvements were also being made to make Data Protection compliance easier by allowing for batches information to be deleted. Work was also beginning to allow benefits e-forms to integrate with the processing system.

- 8.11 Councillor Cook asked how data was currently anonymised or deleted to comply with GDPR. The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support explained that the team currently had lots of housekeeping rules and that data was deleted manually.
- 8.12 Councillor Morley asked what the difference between anonymising data and deleting data was. The Business Support Manager, Christina Morley, explained that anonymisation removed personal identifiers from data but retained the remainder of the information whilst deletion meant that all of the data was deleted, meaning that it could not be used for statistical purposes.
- 8.13 Councillor Osborne asked that Shared Revenues Partnership officers discuss joint working opportunities with the Babergh and Mid-Suffolk District Councils homelessness prevention teams.
- 8.14 The Operations Manager - Benefits and Business Support, explained that progress on the roll out of Universal Credit was being delayed pending a trial taking place in Harrogate. Ms Mayes noted that when the staffing structure had been changed in 2018 a second stage was planned to support the managed migration of customers to Universal Credit, however, this would be delayed until there was more certainty about the future plans for a managed migration.
- 8.15 The Operations Manager – Revenues, Andrew Wilcock, explained that Council Tax collection levels in Babergh and Mid Suffolk were slightly down on 2018, partly as a result of welfare changes affecting Council Tax reduction schemes and partly as a result of an increase in the number of customers paying their Council Tax over 12 months.
- 8.16 The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that the review of single person discounts continued with 1002 removed in 2018/19. This scheme was part funded by Suffolk County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner although there was some discussion as to whether Suffolk County Council would continue to fund this. A review of empty properties was also taking place which was being funded from the SRP reserve and it was hoped would generate additional income for the Councils.
- 8.17 The Operations Manager – Revenues noted that the Government had issued a press release regarding a review of Council Tax recovery and said that SRP was benchmarking its protocols against the Citizens Advice model Council Tax protocol.
- 8.18 Councillor Osborne asked that an explanation of the work which Citizens Advice carried out to support the services provided by the Shared Revenues Partnership be provided to her by email.
- 8.19 Councillor Cook asked whether it was expected that the number of single person discounts removed as a result of the review carried out would reduce. The Operations Manager – Revenues confirmed that discounts were reviewed every month and that the numbers being removed had not reduced year on year. Mr Wilcock noted that people’s circumstances changed and new people

- registered for a discount constantly and so the scheme was likely to identify some which could be removed.
- 8.20 The Operations Manager – Revenues reported that National Non-Domestic Rates collection continued to be very volatile. There continued to be delays in the determination of appeals by the Valuation Office Agency and sizeable provisions needed to be maintained for all three Councils.
- 8.21 Councillor Morley asked how valuation appeals were prioritised. The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that many cases were put on hold whilst a similar case was determined in order that precedents were followed.
- 8.22 The Assistant Director – Corporate Resources (Babergh and Mid-Suffolk District Councils) Katherine Steel, reported that the 2018/19 Financial Year Outturn had resulted in an underspend of £213,854 which had been added to the SRP reserve as agreed by the Joint Committee held on 11 December 2018. The variance had been caused by a number of additional grants, many of which were paid at the end of the financial year, and the overachievement of the transitional vacancy target. The cost of supplies and services had been reduced with savings on printing and postage particularly.
- 8.23 The Assistant Director – Corporate Resources (Babergh and Mid-Suffolk District Councils) noted that a number of pressures had been identified which would reduce the balance of the SRP reserve over the 2019/20 Financial Year to just over the £0.5 million level which was considered to be the minimum appropriate level for the partnership to hold.
- 8.24 Councillor Cook asked whether there were further savings which could be made under the supplies and services budget heading. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that the use of text messages instead of initial Council Tax reminder letters had contributed significantly to the reduction and that she hoped that the new Landlord portal would deliver further savings. All letters and administrative procedures contributing to print and mail cost would continually be reviewed to ensure that they were essential.
- 8.25 The Assistant Director – Corporate Resources (Babergh and Mid-Suffolk District Councils) explained that the 2019/20 profiled budget shown at paragraph 8.8 of the report currently contained variances but that these were expected to be resolved as the year progressed. The level of government grant received was being discussed by officers as there was a significant variance which was unlikely to alter.
- 8.26 The Operations Manager – Revenues reported on the Digital Transformation project, explaining that the new customer portal had been successful with significant proportions of residents reporting moves through the system which avoided double entry of the data. E-Billing continued to grow although numbers were currently still low and further social media and publicity campaigns were planned.

8.27 Councillor Cook asked whether a certain number of people had to sign up to E-Billing to justify the cost of the additional module. The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that the module contained many other features and so there was no break-even figure specifically related to E-Billing.

It was RESOLVED:

- a) **that the SRP financial outturn for 2018/19 and the financial treatment of the favourable variance which allows the SRP to continue to have a reserve to fund the future changes expected, future developments in the service and running costs to maintain the current level of service be noted;**
- b) **that the financial position of the SRP be reviewed by the committee further in 2019/20 in relation to partner contributions.**

9. SRP/19/02 Forward Plan

It was RESOLVED:

that the Forward Plan be noted.

10. 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

11. **Unconfirmed Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 March 2019**

12. **SRP/19/03 Revenues Update**

The meeting closed at 5.06 pm

Chair