

SHARED REVENUES PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

MINUTES

WEDNESDAY 11TH SEPTEMBER 2019

GIPPING ROOM, GRAFTON HOUSE

4.00 PM

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

13. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rudkin. Councillor M Cook was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor Rudkin.

14. Unconfirmed Minutes of the Meeting held on 10 July 2019

It was RESOLVED:

that the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2019 be signed as a true record.

15. To Confirm or Vary the Order of Business

It was RESOLVED:

that the order of business be as printed on the agenda.

16. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

17. SRP/19/04 Shared Revenues Partnership - Service Report

17.1 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support, Amy Mayes, explained that benefits claims continued to be processed quickly and accurately.

- 17.2 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support reported that the Local Authority Error levels for Babergh and Mid-Suffolk Councils were above the 0.48% threshold. If this was not reduced before the end of the financial year it would mean that the cost of the overpayments would be borne by the relevant partner Council, if it could not be recovered from the customer, rather than being paid by the Department for Work and Pensions. The level of error was likely to reduce through the financial year, assuming that no further issues were identified, and even if the overpayments were not covered by the Department for Work and Pensions there was a debt which could be recovered.
- 17.3 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that the new Discretionary Housing Payments Policies adopted by partner Councils, and a range of interventions introduced to reduce demand for these payments, meant that an overspend on the available budgets was not currently forecast.
- 17.4 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support updated on projects and noted that the new landlords benefit portal had been launched, which allowed landlords to see Discretionary Housing Payments as well as other benefits. Automated processes had been introduced to ensure compliance with data protection law. Integrated e-Forms had been launched which would put new data directly into the back office systems and save approximately £20,000 per year.
- 17.5 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that the Shared Revenues Partnership’s results from the ‘Verify Earnings and Pensions Initiative’ had been amongst the top performers in the country and the Department for Work and Pensions had approached SRP seeking to learn and establish ‘best practice’ from the processes and procedures in place in the partnership in order to assist LA’s struggling to perform.
- 17.6 Councillor Cook asked for more information on what the Verify Earnings and Pensions Initiative had involved. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that the Department for Work and Pensions and HMRC shared information on changes to income which could be used to prevent overpayments. These notifications were used to amend earnings and pension incomes to ensure correct levels of Housing Benefit were paid and overpayments prevented. Each electronic notification was downloaded and applied from the VEPs portal which had enabled the Department for Work and Pensions to monitor performance. Notifications were applied where claims had had an interest registered and as such, ensured the latest claim data was made available.
- 17.7 The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support reported that it was now unlikely that any further roll-out announcements for Universal Credit would be made before October 2020. The pilot in Harrogate, whilst initially set for up to 10,000 customers, was progressing very cautiously and the numbers of customers migrating was low. The findings would be reported back to Parliament in October 2020.

- 17.8 The Operations Manager – Revenues, Andrew Wilcock, explained that collection rates were lower than at the same point in 2018 for all three partner Councils. This was as a result of a rise in the number of people paying over 12 months rather than 10 months and a continued increase in the number of changes to Council Tax Reduction entitlement.
- 17.9 The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that the collection of Council Tax from those who benefitted from the Council Tax Reduction Scheme had increased as a result of further changes to the recovery procedure, with reminders now being sent, followed by a summons a month later and a Court hearing a month after that. It was noted that those people who had always paid some Council Tax were more likely to pay an increased amount, whilst those who had never previously been required to pay were less likely to pay their new bill.
- 17.10 Councillor Davis pointed out an error in the percentage figures in paragraph 7.4 of the report, for which the Operations Manager – Revenues apologised.
- 17.11 The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that the review of accounts in receipt of a single resident discount continued to identify those not entitled to the discount and was calculated to have prevented discounts of £62,802 in the period April-July 2019.
- 17.12 The Operations Manager – Revenues noted that business rates remained volatile with collection rates in Ipswich slightly lower than at the same time in 2018/19 and the collection rates in Babergh and Mid-Suffolk being slightly higher. There continued to be a requirement for significant appeal provisions to be made by Councils as there remained a number of appeals from the 2010 rating list, whilst there was also the potential for appeals from the 2017 rating list. The level of provision needed was assessed quarterly by independent experts.
- 17.13 The Operations Manager – Revenues reported that the tender for Enforcement Agency Services was likely to be awarded in the near future.
- 17.14 The Head of Finance and Revenues, John Chance, reported that the Shared Revenues Partnership was forecast to reach a break even position by the end of the financial year. The full year transitional vacancy target had nearly been achieved, and an additional grant of £95,000 had been received which officers were considering how to use. The Head of Finance and Revenues explained that the SRP reserve balance was forecast to reduce to c.£0.5m by the end of the financial year.
- 17.15 Councillor Whitehead asked for more information about the proposed empty homes review. The Operations Manager – Revenues explained that the review would be carried out by an expert external company and that it was hoped that it would allow partner councils to claim more Empty Homes Funding from Central Government. The process would involve forms being posted through the doors of all empty properties, checks being done using other data sources and home visits.

17.16 Councillor Cook asked whether the achievement of the transitional vacancy target so early in the financial year suggested that staffing in the Shared Revenues Partnership needed to be reviewed. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that a second service review had been planned once the impact of the full roll-out of Universal Credit was known but noted that this had been delayed. The Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that current staff were fully employed and there was likely to be a need for more revenue collection staff. The difficulty of recruiting officers with relevant experience was also noted, and this had contributed to the transitional vacancy target as some posts had not been successfully recruited to.

17.17 Councillors discussed whether staffing should be considered further and the Operations Manager – Benefits and Business Support explained that staffing was managed and would be considered as part of the setting of the service budget for 2020/21.

It was RESOLVED:

that the current financial and performance position of the Shared Revenues Partnership be noted.

18. SRP/19/05 Forward Plan

It was RESOLVED:

that the Forward Plan be noted.

19. 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

20. **Unconfirmed Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 10 July 2019**

21. **SRP/19/06 Revenues Update**

The meeting closed at 4.45 pm

Chair