

Partnering for mutual benefit

The Anglia Revenues Partnership, the third largest provider of revenues and benefits services in England, is investing in technology to automate its processes. Rachel Dalton reports

The Anglia Revenues Partnership has experienced steady growth and obtained efficiencies since its creation in 2003.

The shared revenues and benefits service was originally formed by Breckland and Forest Heath DCs but has grown to include East Cambridgeshire DC in 2007, St Edmundsbury BC in 2011, Fenland DC in 2014 and Suffolk Coastal and Waveney DCs last year.

“ARP is run by a joint committee,” says Paul Corney, head of the partnership “It’s an agreement between the seven councils; all seven partners are equal,” he says. The committee comprises one councillor from each partner authority, supported by an operational improvement board on which senior officers represent each council, and the ARP management team.

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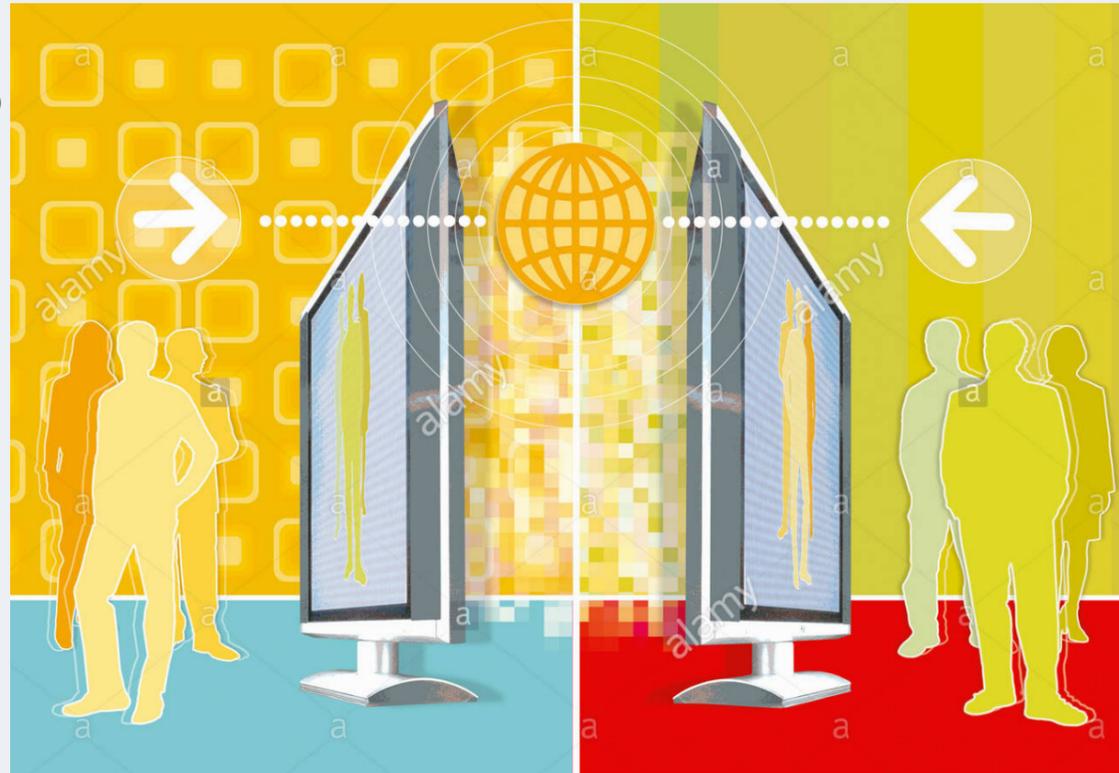
The ARP’s main functions are to bill for and collect council tax and business rates, assess and award housing benefit, and investigate benefit fraud. Its combined caseload is 418,000, making it the third largest service by caseload in England, behind Birmingham and Leeds. Employing 230 staff, awarding benefits worth £250m and collecting £560m in taxes, the partnership is a major operation.

The seven councils retain their individual revenues and benefits staff. To enable this to work, specialised teams have been created across four sites to provide solid expertise within key support areas and use a single electronic document management and workflow system, Civica Documents.

“The partnership allows us to take the best practice from each of the seven councils,” Mr Corney says.

“You have the experience of seven different districts and take the very best from each to deliver the best services you can. Within that you can then have focused staff who become experts in their areas.”

This has helped to reduce costs by £2.5m for the partnership’s members through better processes, as well as to achieve a number of improvements in key areas of performance.



An example of this is the increased focus on Waveney and Suffolk Coastal DCs’ performance relating to new benefit claims. Before joining ARP in 2015, it exceeded the Department for Work & Pensions’ national average of 23 days for processing new benefit claims. Now, it is achieving upper quartile performance, processing claims within 16 days.

The ARP has also enabled the seven councils to exceed their council tax collection fund targets by up to 5%, bringing in additional income of £5.5m across the partnership.

The benefits are not only better collection of tax and faster processing of claims. The ARP has been able to

collaborate on improving data to help the councils secure larger payments from the new homes bonus scheme – a particularly vital source of income for districts.

As the new homes bonus rewards councils for the number of empty homes brought into use as well as newly built houses, the ARP introduced an annual review of all empty properties in each area, supported by the authorities’ housing teams. This helps the councils accurately identify the number of empty homes to better target support for owners in bringing them back into use.

The ARP has also offered opportunities for joint procurement, Mr Corney

point where any officer at any of our four back-office locations could drop any one of the seven authorities’ cases into its own in-tray. We are working with Civica on one storage area for all of our documents across all seven councils.

“Phase one was simply to get all new documents for all authorities onto one system in one holding tray. That is complete now. We can organise our processes as if we were one authority.”

This means all council staff within the ARP have access to a single hub for all data and documents, which remain secure.

The next stage will be to use this groundwork to introduce more automation to the processes, he says.

“Phase two, in mid-May, will be to optimise the use of the system for automation. Across all seven partners we’ll be running automation to make the processes work as best that they can.

“We’re looking at things like barcoding solutions. This is where you can send a document out with a barcode on it and when the customer returns the document, you scan it and it would automatically file that document with all of the documents relating to that customer.”

Mr Corney says the partnership is looking to technology to expand on their success by automating customer enquiries functions as well.

“We’re looking at what Civica can offer to deliver solutions around web services and self-service,” he says.

“The aspiration is to get to the point where any officer at any of our four back-office locations could drop any one of the seven authorities’ cases into its own in-tray

says. Work is now under way on a single document management system with new software functions, helping the councils to align procedures and make further savings.

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COMMENT

CHRIS GINNELY,
Managing director, digital solutions,
Civica



Knit together to achieve smarter working

Councils are increasingly identifying opportunities to not only consolidate and share back-office functions to achieve economies of scale, but actually knit themselves together from the bottom up. According to the Local Government Association’s latest shared services map, there were 416 shared service arrangements between councils in 2015, which in turn saved a massive £462m.

This new service model, however, requires a fresh way of working as councils learn to work together rather than focus on their own requirements. For it to succeed, councils must consider three points:

Work towards the same end-goals

Before councils embark on a shared service programme, it’s crucial they are aware of each other’s goals and work towards them together. Gaining trust and developing a strong leadership team is vital here. Working in partnership rather than autonomously is a big change and has to be treated with care. Assigning clear roles and responsibilities, keeping each other informed at all times about the likely outcomes of the partnership, continually re-evaluating processes to ensure it is working for everyone and working towards the same end-goals are the necessary attributes of success.

Use a common technology platform

Public sector leaders embarking on a shared service model must ensure that a common IT systems foundation is used. Integrating technology for every team, no matter what organisation they work for, is essential to improving workflows, enhancing service delivery and achieving the most efficient, smooth and progressive partnership. And while integrating IT, data security is paramount; organisations must ensure that high security levels are mutually maintained at all times and protocols are followed.

Learn from private sector experience

To ensure councils are adopting the latest and most efficient shared services methods, it is often beneficial to engage a private sector partner. Public and private sector partnerships are sensible from a practical point of view, enabling better economies of scale and allowing the organisations to share and blend best practice to support the reshaping of services and processes. However, for the partnerships to work, they need to be sensitive to public sector employee concerns and committed to improving productivity by equipping rather than dismantling the existing workforce.

As discussed in our report The Changing Landscape for Local Government, developing strategic partnerships is crucial for public sector organisations to meet the changing demands of the public. It is clear that the shared services model is working, allowing councils to offer improved methods of service delivery. Greater Manchester, for example, has already seen the benefits of sharing services between traditionally siloed organisations. It is how public sector evolve and manage their partnerships that will shape their future and enable them to continually improve efficiencies for years to come.