

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, 15 September 2020 at 11.00 am
Virtual meeting via Teams

PRESENT

Mr J.P. Cowen (Chairman)	Mr M. Cook
Mr D Ambrose Smith (Vice-Chairman)	Mrs K. French (Substitute Member)
Mrs S. Broughton	

In Attendance

Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Jo Andrews	- Strategic Manager (Revenues)
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP
Stuart Philpot	- Strategic Manager (Support Services) ARP
Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD
Nick Khan	- Strategic Director (East Suffolk)
Rachael Mann	- Assistant Director (Resources & Performance)
Ian Smith	- Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs)
Teresa Smith	- Democratic Services Team Leader
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer
Leah Mickleborough	- Service Manager - Democratic Services/Monitoring Officer

50/20 CHAIRPERSON AND VICE-CHAIRPERSON (AGENDA ITEM 1)

After being duly proposed and seconded and with no other nominations being made it was:

RESOLVED that Councillor Philip Cowen be appointed as Chairman for the ensuing year.

After being duly proposed and seconded and with no other nominations being made it was:

RESOLVED that Councillor David Ambrose-Smith be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

51/20 TREASURER (AGENDA ITEM 2)

After being duly proposed and seconded and with no other nominations being made it was **RESOLVED** that:

Breckland Council be appointed as Treasurer for the ensuing year.

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52/20 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 3)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19 December 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

53/20 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 4)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jan French and Alison Chubbock, Chief Accountant (BDC).

Councillor Kim French was in attendance as substitute.

54/20 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 5)

None.

55/20 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 6)

None.

56/20 PERFORMANCE AND SERVICE UPDATES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 7)

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

Notwithstanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Members were informed that subject to the Council Tax collection rates, all targets had been achieved following the resilience demonstrated by the ARP employees during these unprecedented times.

The collection of Council Tax was behind target by £721,415 and Jo Andrews, the Strategic Manager (Revenues) ARP, explained that Officers had not been able to take normal action to recover outstanding amounts through the Magistrates Court due to the restrictions in place in respect of Covid and also due to the increase in Council Tax support there was less Council Tax to collect. A good response had been received to the soft reminders that had been sent out earlier in the year and many instalment arrangements had been made. Statutory reminders had been sent in August 2020 to those who had not responded and had not paid anything toward their Council Tax.

All targets had been met in respect of Business Rates collection except for East Suffolk. Collection targets had been adjusted to reflect the amount of Government funded rate relief awarded to businesses in early April 2020. However, since then new guidance had been issued increasing the number of eligible businesses and others have been identified. This had increased the amount of relief awarded, which was a significant amount for East Suffolk. The authority would be receiving this funding, but it was not expected to be received in this financial year. Also, in respect of East Suffolk, one significant ratepayer was currently in arrears with instalments amounting to £1.8M and there have been backdated refunds of £862K made in this financial year mostly in respect of appeals against rateable values.

Councillor Broughton thanked all ARP staff for their hard work and

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commitment throughout this pandemic. Referring to the business rates issue, she asked what could be done going forward to prevent businesses going under.

The Strategic Manager (Revenues) ARP pointed out that this year quite a considerable number of businesses had received 100% rate relief and NNDR collection was 'holding up' for most Councils; therefore, it was hoped, going forward, that this would be maintained. Discussions with the Courts were being had in respect of setting Hearing dates but in comparison with Council Tax, NNDR cases were normally relatively low.

The Chairman also congratulated all staff and felt that the business continuity exercise that ARP had carried out in December 2019 had put the Partnership in good stead. He also thanked the Strategic Manager for her update. He pointed out that he had been having conversations with Alison Chubbock, the Chief Accountant (BDC) about the issues with NNDR and felt that moving forward, a close eye needed to be kept on this matter as NNDR could be further affected in the next quarter.

Councillor Ambrose-Smith also conveyed his thanks and congratulated all ARP staff.

The Performance and Service updates report was otherwise noted.

57/20 ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2020-21 (AGENDA ITEM 8)

Paul Corney, the Head of ARP presented the report in the Chief Accountant's absence.

This report had been based on information provided by each of the partner Councils as at 31 July 2020.

The forecast at this stage of the year showed a deficit against budget of £690k. There was a small overspend due to additional software costs incurred for the award of business grants due to Covid and a large shortfall in income due to loss of income from enforcement work carried out over the 4-month period. All details could be found at Appendix A of the report.

The Head of ARP alluded to the lack of Hearings that the Strategic Manager (Revenues) had mentioned earlier and further alluded to the grants received from Government to cover the extra burden placed on the Business Rate Team awarding many business grants due to Covid. These grants would be retained by each Council and would not therefore show against the ARP over spend.

The Head of ARP also mentioned the Government grant that could be claimed by each Council in respect of lost income and he was pleased to announce that final Government guidance had very recently been received and it appeared that 75p in every £ should be provided in respect of ARP Enforcement lost income. Breckland Council would be claiming this funding and, assuming the amount could be claimed, it would be distributed accordingly.

The Chairman felt that this would be very good news.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

58/20 COVID RESPONSE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The ARP Strategic Manager (Support) presented the report that informed Members of the impact of Covid-19 on the provision of ARP services.

Referring to when the pandemic first started in March 2020 and following lockdown, 296 staff across the four partner authorities had migrated to working from home.

There had also been many other demands on resource since March to communicate with and update customers, Government and the partner authorities.

These included:

- Updates to website
- Updates to recorded messages on the telephones (RAD messages)
- Amendments to templates which mention recovery action/costs
- Additional web forms published to allow ratepayers to request payment arrangements
- Provision of statistical data for comparison & monitoring of progress
- Regular review meetings with partner authorities for Grant application queries
- Daily monitoring of info from the Government
- Government returns

To address the additional pressure on resources, additional agency staff had been taken on and staff had been re-deployed from other departments to support the Business Rates Team.

Relief had been granted to 5,444 businesses amounting to over £100M and various grants provided by Government had been awarded.

Mitel phone systems had to be re-configured for home workers. A Communication Group had been set up using WhatsApp, and an ARP Staff Support chat group had been created on Facebook.

The post room at Breckland House operates for all partners, receiving all ARP post and document submissions centrally to Breckland House. The post opening procedures had been immediately revised in line with Government guidelines and included a reduction to two members of staff opening the post 2 days after delivery, with gloves and hand sanitising available to staff.

The ARP Strategic Manager (Support) stated that all partners, particularly West Suffolk, had played a huge part in getting all the IT infrastructure in place to allow ARP operations to continue during the transition to homeworking, and he formally thanked them for their commitment.

The forward planning of the desktop disaster recovery exercise and the business continuity actions carried out in December 2019 had put ARP in a very good position.

Councillor Cook felt that the ARP had done an incredible job and had achieved damage limitation. All had learnt to cope with this new technology, and he hoped that all working practices would be continually revised going forward.

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Councillor Broughton admired everyone for working from home but asked if there were any plans to gradually return to the office. Members were informed that for those who were working in the office information had been circulated to use Teams rather than walking round the building and speaking to people in person. Additionally, all sites were constantly being sanitised.

The Head of ARP stated that the strategic work that Officers had been involved in was to get a better understanding of what office space would be needed in future. All Team Managers had been having regular one to ones and staff meetings. The one to ones were increasing and the discussions held were not all about work.

In response to a question, the Head of ARP explained the process in respect of the additional claim forms as noted on page 50 of the agenda pack.

The Chairman added his thanks for the work carried out across all Councils. He asked how ARP was going to manage going forward in respect of customers and clients visiting the building. Members were informed that the Customer Strategy Group (Customer Leads from each Council and ARP Managers) were discussing each Councils plans for customers to come back into their buildings and ARPs part in these plans.

ARP was also working with Capita to enable more to be done on-line and had an assisted process for customers who found self-service difficult.

The report was otherwise noted.

59/20 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 10)

Adrian Mills, ARP Strategic Director (Billing and Benefits), presented the update on Welfare Reform.

Several changes were highlighted (see paragraph 2.2.3 of the report) in respect of Universal Credit (UC). Due to Covid-19, DWP had stopped the Harrogate migration pilot and plans were now on hold. However, in the interim, new UC claims had been submitted but no further information had yet been received from DWP.

The Chairman asked what was happening with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). Members were informed that DWP would be issuing a report suggesting possible procurement which would be shared in due course.

Following further discussion, the report was otherwise noted.

60/20 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The Chairman said that he would like to see the following update reported on in a future Welfare reform report:

- How CAB advice provided to DWP customers concerning UC would be provided once the CAB contract ends.

61/20 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 12)

It was noted that the next meeting would most probably be held virtually via 'Teams' but this would be confirmed nearer the time.

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It was agreed that the pre-meetings would also be re-instated in future, details to be confirmed.

The Chairman thanked everyone involved for all their hard work and to the Officers for setting up these virtual meetings and sorting out all the technical difficulties.

The Chairman and the Vice-Chairman also thanked the former Chairman, Councillor Broughton for her previous term in office.

The meeting closed at 12.00 pm

CHAIRMAN