

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL
WEST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES & BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Tuesday, 7 March 2023 at 10.00 am
Virtual Meeting via Zoom

PRESENT

Cllr E. Back (Vice-Chairman)	Cllr Sarah Broughton
Cllr David Ambrose-Smith	Cllr Philip Cowen

In Attendance

Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD (Fenland)
Alison Chubbock	- Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance
Lorraine King	- Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP)
Rachael Mann	- Director (Resources & Property) (West Suffolk)
Brian Mew	- Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer (East Suffolk)
Adrian Mills	- Head of ARP
Matthew Waite-Wright	- Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP)
Ian Smith	- Director, Finance (East Cambs)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

Vice-Chairman in the Chair

1/23 MINUTES M(AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 20 December 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

2/23 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

An apology for absence was received from the Chairman, Councillor French.

3/23 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

4/23 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None declared.

5/23 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) provided Members with a detailed overview of the Quarter 3 performance

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report as at the end of December 2022.

A discussion had been had with OIB about introducing a tolerance rule for targets and it had been agreed that if Councils were within 1% of the target, a 'green' against the target would still be given.

Overall, all partner Councils combined were on target in all areas except for the NNDR collection for East Suffolk Council. This target had been affected by a large refund during 2022 of around £5m but without this refund all targets would be on course.

An update on each service was then provided.

Enforcement

The Team was now fully staffed with Enforcement Agents. At the end of December it had been forecast that there would be a shortfall against budgeted income and expenditure, due to the energy rebate awards and the cost-of-living; however, significantly less cases had been received through the recovery processes for enforcement action, so for this year there had been less cases passed forward to the Recovery Teams from each individual Council that had led to this shortfall in income. However, in total the Enforcement Team had collected just short of £3m and just over £750k in fees.

Further Recovery

The Further Recovery Team comprising of just 3 staff doing bankruptcies and charging orders had, between them, over the 3 Quarters collected just over £750k. It was anticipated that £1m could be reached by the end of Quarter 4.

Council Tax

Overall collection was on target. It had been expected that with the cost-of-living crisis there might have been a downturn in collections, but this was not the case. At the end of Quarter 3, for both council tax and business rates there had been a great deal of work in respect of the annual billing and this still continued.

Work continued on the change of address automation project.

The Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme had been extended for 2 months and ended on 30 November 2022, along with the Discretionary Scheme but had since been succeeded by a couple of new energy support schemes.

Benefits

Both Council Tax Support and Benefits performance had achieved targets, despite increased demand from the continuing high levels of changes to addresses and ARP continued to utilise generically trained staff to focus resource where it was most needed.

The Team was now automating 97% of changes in Universal Credit and had become a reference site for other Capita sites. When customers notified Universal Credit of a change of address or circumstance an automated process followed and ARP systems were updated automatically, a massive

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saving in staff resource.

Non-Domestic Rates

Overall, collection was slightly behind target due to the large refund at East Suffolk. Revaluation was the biggest element of work as it was the first time in 7 years that such properties had been re-valued. A new list had been received from the Valuation Office Agenda and all NDR lists were in balance.,

It was noted that annual billing had proceeded successfully.

ARP Systems and Digital

Work continued with Capita, with other local authorities and wider Capita users to get the most out of the software's. ARP was currently working with a large Unitary Council sharing knowledge and experiences which would be beneficial in the future.

Work volumes with both system admin and EDMS were quite high but through working with the Programme Manager a strong plan of priorities was being made to ensure that resources could meet expectations and demands. All ongoing projects had been scored in line with strategic priorities and regular project updates were provided for each team.

A number of projects were currently on-going, working out which ones were of higher importance and the projects that ARP wanted to put the most IT software in place.

The Systems Team had been heavily involved in the delivery of both the Council Tax energy rebate scheme and the CARF scheme which ended on 30th November 2022.

Fraud & Compliance

Progress had been made in respect of the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub with East Cambridgeshire District Council and Fenland District Council approving the business case to extend the Fraud and Compliance work for the two partners.

It was reported that the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub paperwork was now with County for final sign-off. This had not been a straightforward process, but ARP was optimistic that this would come to fruition shortly.

The Fraud Team had continued the work with Norfolk and Suffolk with the additional resources that both had provided. The Assistant Fraud Manager had also undertaken a review of the Fraud Services at Broadland and South Norfolk Councils. Reports had been agreed to take on Broadland, South Norfolk and Lincolnshire Councils fraud provision. The agreement had been drawn up and gone through the legal process and the latest position was that it was now with data protection colleagues.

Better Customer Experience Programme

The Council Tax change of address portal service continued to be a success, with around 45% of address changes being submitted via this service.

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The Project Teams in ARP continued to invest resources to implement automation.

Through Tel Solutions products that ARP used for Council Tax arrears/reminders, customers now received an automated telephone message, text message or email to encourage payments and make the payment prior to a reminder being sent. This had resulted in fewer reminders and less summons being sent and subsequently improved collection rates overall.

Under the system & digital service update, Councillor Cowen had heard it mentioned that ARP would find it beneficial working with a Unitary Authority and asked for clarity on this point in terms of why it would be beneficial.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that this would enable knowledge and best practice to be shared to improve efficiencies.

The performance report was otherwise noted.

6/23 ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2022-23 (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director for Finance & S151 officer (BDC) presented the report.

The report was of a similar picture that Members had seen at the last meeting in December 2022, in terms of the overspend.

The reasons for this overspend had been detailed in Appendix A of the report. Whilst there had been particular pressures in staffing and supplies and services these had been mitigated as much as possible by ARP and also, as mentioned in the performance report, the enforcement income and the fraud services from Cambridgeshire County Council was slightly lower than budgeted. Notification from Government was still awaited on the value of the New Burdens Grants. It had been previously stated that this funding would be received by the end of March 2023 but the value was not yet known; therefore, these grants had not been included in the report. Once received the overspend would be reduced accordingly.

In addition to the above other grants had been received that some councils had retained directly which again had not been shown in the report.

Councillor Broughton asked if ARP should be worried about the overspend going forward. The Assistant Director of Finance stated that she was mostly concerned with the income rather than the spend but this was being closely monitored. The income would always be a challenge as it was affected by matters outside of the councils' control such as the Council Tax rebate scheme which was very good news for residents but reduced the income from enforcement. She was comfortable with the budget moving forward but it was definitely an area that needed to be closely monitored.

Councillor Cowen referred back to the performance report that also linked into Councillor Broughton's aforementioned comment. He had noted that the Enforcement Team was up to full strength, yet the enforcement income was dropping and consequently there was now a perceived mismatch. He assumed that the staffing complement would be able to be redeployed elsewhere in the short term and perhaps begin to address, for example,

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Cambridgeshire fraud, and whether or not ARP needed to look at how the staffing complement was keeping pace with the income stream. He had been championing ARP to drive forward income and therefore was keen to understand that when the overspend was getting close to a £500k overspend, whether that was going to be reduced due to the New Burdens funding but also whether or not it was going to have a potential impact on other aspects of the business.

The Head of ARP explained that the staff complement was being kept under review in terms of the workforce makeup in the Team. Also, time had been spent on reviewing and understanding the number of cases that had been sent through to ARP as there had been a 30% shortfall in cases in this financial year. However, in the conversations that were being had with various partners/authorities for this financial year, it was forecast that cases should increase. It was noted that when ARP took on Broadland's enforcement work in July 2022, the staff complement had not been increased. Members were informed that all such matters were being discussed at the Operational Improvement Board meetings and would remain under review.

The report was otherwise noted.

7/23 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 7)

Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing Systems (ARP) presented the report.

The following areas were highlighted.

In January 2023, a report had been issued that had provided an analysis of an initial 499 cases that had moved across to Universal Credit. Of those, 423 cases had transitioned with 50% of them being awarded Transitional Protection. 63 of those had applied by phone and 7 cases had yet to make a claim. This data from the report would inform the next stages of migration.

As always, the Team continued to press for more information and timelines at the regular DWP & LGA liaison meetings and further updates on the larger roll out programme were awaited.

Following the announcement in the Autumn Statement, the Team was gathering further data to try and model the impact of the delay of moving in ESA and pensioner cases across until 2028.

Referring to section 2.3.6 of the report, DWP was proposing to retain the current methodology for DHP allocations, with a 2-year funding freeze with allocations to be paid in one upfront payment this year. This was to retain consistency and help Local Authorities plan. A short consultancy had taken place and the allocations had been made in February 2023.

The report was otherwise noted.

8/23 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 8)

Councillor Cowen referred to a matter that the Assistant Director of Finance (BDC) had raised with him recently and thought it would be useful to bring it to the attention of Members at this meeting.

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The Assistant Director of Finance felt it would be useful to bring this to the next informal session as more detail would be available at that time.

As Members were unaware of the issue, Councillor Broughton asked if a little more information could be provided now.

Members were informed that this was in respect of a procurement issue that had been challenged and legal proceedings had been issued.

Councillor Cowen felt it would be inappropriate to have any further disclosure, but further details would be provided to Members in due course.

9/23 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 13 June 2023 at 10am, in the Level 5 Meeting room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford were noted.

It was announced that Brian Mew, the Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer for East Suffolk Council would be retiring at the end of March and this in fact was his last ARP meeting.

The Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer thanked everyone for their support and the services that were delivered for East Suffolk Council, and he hoped that he had been able to contribute to the achievements of ARP and wished the Partnership continued success going forward.

Members extended their thanks to him for all he had done for ARP, he would be sorely missed and wished him a happy retirement.

The meeting closed at 10.35 am

CHAIRMAN