

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, 20 September 2022 at 10.00 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford. IP24 1BT

PRESENT

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

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	- Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

Chairman

Councillor Back, the Vice-Chairman in the Chair.

Councillor French, the Chairman, was unavoidably late but was content for Councillor Back to carry on with the meeting.

29/22 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

30/22 APOLOGIES

None.

31/22 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

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32/22 DECLARATIONS

None declared.

33/22 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement ARP presented the report.

Overall, the report highlighted that all partner councils combined were on target in respect of collections, except for business rates collection for East Suffolk which was in regard to a large historic refund for a nuclear power station, and council tax collections for East Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk DC that were both narrowly below target despite the energy rebate payments. These would be monitored going forward. The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement said that it would be interesting to see how council tax collections worked moving forward into the Autumn months in light of the wider economic position. In terms of NNDR and the second round of covid additional relief fund (CARF) applications the take up from businesses had been disappointing and such funding would have to be returned if not used by the deadline.

Members were informed that the Systems Team had focussed heavily on the implementation of the Council tax rebate scheme, paying £22.2m to direct debit payers by the end of April and 100% of the main scheme by the end of June placing ARP in the top 4% of Councils nationally.

Councillor Back was pleased that everything seemed to be going in the right direction.

Councillor Cowen felt that the fact that ARP was in the top 4% should be recorded in the Minutes, as he felt this was an excellent service and such efforts should be publicised.

Councillor French agreed, an excellent job done by all.

Moving to the narrative at the end of the report, Members were informed that there had been a particularly strong performance in terms of fraud and compliance work and a really good performance in further recovery.

The report was otherwise noted.

34/22 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

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

Referring to section 2.1.14 of the report, Members were provided with an update in relation to migration of Universal Credit (UC). The Melton and Bolton trial had been moved to the end of August. A further 250 letters had been issued in July trialling a different approach and had been expanded into Cornwall at the same time where 250 letters had been issued to trial a new demographic.

DWP were now working with Harrow. Further details were awaited.

The report was otherwise noted.

35/22 ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

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

The report provided Members with an update on the full year financial position against budget for the ARP.

The forecast at this stage of the year showed an overspend against budget of £633k for the whole of ARP with £515k of this relating to the proposed national pay award, based on inflation; this was only an estimate at the moment and could be lower or higher. Appendix A provided more detail.

It was noted that the ARP was looking how costs could be reduced for all partners over the long term.

Councillor Cowen drew attention to Appendix A as he had noticed an overspend on supplies and services and asked for an explanation of how this was going to be tackled.

Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP explained that the overspend had been due to new ICT products, the West Suffolk ICT Team had obtained more security on IT software. ARP were reviewing its supplies and costs and were already talking to its printing and postage supplier as well as looking at generating new income streams in terms of service demand. As far as employment related costs were concerned, ARP were recruiting on 12-month fixed term contracts to strike a balance on where it could make efficiencies.

In response, Councillor Cowen understood that this would mean employee costs would increase whilst looking to drive up income which would have a knock-on effect. He did not expect an answer now but in terms of balance between employees and income derived, ARP needed to ensure that the number of staff on the books did exactly what they were meant to do. As far as supplies and services were concerned, he was aware that many organisations had suffered cyber-attacks, and he asked what ARP were going to do with the budgets going forward. The exchange rate was also forcing everyone into additional costs and ARP needed to be budgeting year on year to cover the additional security needs and asked how this was going to be dealt with as this could be an expanding problem particularly with the current issues in Russia.

The Head of ARP explained that the partnership was now at the point of setting its budgets for the medium term for the next 3 years. The ICT Manager was already aware of the estimated costs for the next 3 years and this would be built into the costs and forecasts. In terms of income enhancements, ARP would take any efficiency savings on a case-by-case basis.

Councillor French pointed out that such matters had already been discussed at the recent informal meeting, money did have to be spent moving forward.

In terms of income, the Head of ARP explained that although there had been some progression with the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub there was still a risk as this was still in negotiation.

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In response to a question in respect of the above, the Head of ARP explained the holdup was the County Council's understanding of the income projection.

Councillor French asked who at County was dealing with this.

Ian Smith, the Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs) stated that the County required evidence to prove that savings had been made before they paid the districts – the relevant documentation had still not been signed.

The Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs) said that he would provide Councillor French with the contact details.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

36/22 COUNCIL TAX ENERGY REBATE SCHEME UPDATE

Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) provided Members with an update on the Council Tax rebate grant scheme.

Since the end of June over 10,000 refund requests had now been processed since the Government announced this Council Tax rebate grant of £150 for all households in Council Tax bands A to D in England, or those in band E in receipt of a disabled band reduction.

This grant scheme, administered locally by the Anglia Revenues Partnership, formed part of a £22 billion support package to help households with the rising costs of energy bills.

To ensure payments reached as many households as possible in a timely manner, ARP worked with customers to provide bank details, before applying remaining rebates to Council Tax accounts by mid-June.

A new on-line refund form had been introduced and the data was being monitored. Also, a residual discretionary pot had been established and was still progressing to help additional households who were impacted by rising energy costs – the first of such payments commenced in early August and would continue until the funds were spent or until the end of November 2022.

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing was pleased to announce that all five ARP partners were in the top 4% in England, and amongst only eleven authorities, out of 308, who had paid 100% of their main scheme payments. Across the East of England all partners were in the top 15. The recent Local Government Chronicle (LJC) article showed that the ARP was in a very positive position.

Councillor French drew attention to section 7 of the report where she had noticed that the dedicated telephone helpline that had been set up by the ARP had received over 1000 calls per day at its peak and asked how this had been managed.

Members were informed that thankfully this peak had been short-lived, and the calls had fallen since, all staff had helped at the time and had been managed successfully.

Councillor French felt that everyone had done exceptionally well and

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congratulated all who had been involved. She also mentioned the forthcoming budget and hoped that it would be a successful one.

Councillor Broughton asked if the success rate had been due to the regular communications that ARP had put in place, and as far as the number of calls were concerned, she asked how ARP would ensure that this did not happen again.

Members were informed that it had been a very busy time everything happened at once, the main scheme functionality was only released in mid-April 2022, at the same time when non direct debit customers were being contacted but the ARP Team would be better prepared going forward as all functionalities were already in place.

The Head of ARP pointed out that an extra insert had also been included in the Council Tax bills that had been sent out earlier in the year as well as extensive communications on all partner websites. As far as the telephone calls were concerned, a dedicated phone line had been set up and temporary staff from agencies had assisted with the number of calls. Resources and various positions would be looked at, once the outcomes from the forthcoming budget had been announced,

Councillor French asked if direct debit payments had increased.

Members were informed that they had increased which had been a positive improvement, and ARP was about to embark on annual council tax billing for 2023/24 where several initiatives were being worked on.

Councillor French also asked how the £400 energy rebate payments were going to be paid.

Members were informed that such payments would not have an impact on local authorities whatsoever, as these were being dealt with by the energy providers.

Councillor Cowen felt that direct debit payments needed to continue to increase as it helped people to budget more efficiently. He also felt that as the ARP Partnership had been amongst very few authorities in the country who had achieved 100% of their main scheme payments, ARP had a model that would benefit other local authorities going forward, which could be an opportunity for income the same as enforcement.

The Head of ARP said that such matters would be discussed with the Operational Board.

37/22 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

Councillor Cowen was mindful of how difficult it was for some Members to get to these meetings on time due to the amount of travelling involved. He understood the need for all to meet up on occasion but asked if there was a way that informal/non-decision-making meetings could be arranged via Zoom or Teams and continue to meet face to face for the formal, decision-making meetings.

The Head of ARP stated that the advice that had been provided from Breckland Council was that as these were public meetings they had to be

held in person.

Councillor Cowen felt that such advice needed to be reviewed.

Rachel Mann, Director (Resources & Property) (West Suffolk) said that this would be investigated, and a solution would be brought forward.

The Head of ARP agreed and stated that such matters would be reviewed with Breckland Council to establish if there was any scope for such changes to be made.

38/22 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 6 December 2022 at 10am, Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford were noted.

The arrangements for the virtual briefing had already been added to Members' and Officers calendars and would commence at 9.30am on Wednesday, 16 November as previously notified.

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The meeting closed at 10.50 am

CHAIRMAN