

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 JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Tuesday, 13 June 2023 at 10.30 am in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford. IP24
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PRESENT

Cllr Paul Ashton (Chairman)	Cllr James Lay
Cllr Diane Hind (Vice-Chairman)	Cllr Chris Boden (Substitute Member)
Cllr Philip Cowen	

In Attendance

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

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10/23 CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR

It had been noted that following a change to the East Suffolk Council representatives for the Joint Committee, Councillor Paul Ashton had been appointed as the Member representative and Councillor Peter Byatt had been appointed as the substitute.

In the absence of the outgoing Chairman, Councillor Jan French, Councillor Chris Boden her substitute welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the procedure in relation to the respective appointments.

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

RESOLVED that Councillor Councillor Paul Ashton (East Suffolk) be

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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 Diane Hind (West Suffolk) be appointed as Vice-Chair for the ensuing year.

Councillor Paul Ashton in the Chair.

11/23 TREASURER

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.

12/23 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

13/23 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor French.

Rachael Mann, Director of Resources & Property (West Suffolk) advised that due to a technicality Councillor Hind had not officially been appointed as a Member of this Joint Committee until their Cabinet meeting which was being held later that evening. Councillor Hind would not therefore be able to vote on any matter on the agenda but would remain in the meeting to observe.

14/23 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

15/23 DECLARATIONS

None declared.

16/23 ARP ACTUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022-23 (STANDING ITEM)

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) provided Members with a detailed overview of the Performance Report 2022-23.

Overall, all partner Councils combined were on target in all areas except for the NNDR collections for Breckland Council, East Cambridgeshire District Council and East Suffolk Council. The reasons these particular councils had not reached their targets

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compared to the previous year were provided (see narrative included in the report).

An update on each service was then provided.

The Fraud & Compliance Team had exceeded their target and was being put forward for a national award.

The Fraud Manager and Assistant Fraud Manager had undertaken a review of the Fraud Service at Broadland and South Norfolk Councils. This was on a chargeable consultancy basis and a report had been produced detailing findings and recommendations. OIB and Joint Committee have agreed to the business cases submitted in respect of taking on fraud and Single Person Discounts (SPD) review work for Broadland and South Norfolk and taking on the SPD review work for seven Lincolnshire Councils, funded by the County Council. The Fraud Manager had been closely involved with the energy rebate schemes, having completed a fraud risk assessment and similar work would continue relating to the two new Energy Bill Support Schemes.

The Council Tax Billing Team had become more resilient and could now deal with more generic matters such as benefits.

The Valuation Office Agency revalued businesses for the 2023 Revaluation list, all lists were in balance and were actioned in time for annual billing 2023-24.

Over 50 projects were ongoing, and the annual billing had been a great success, and further automated services were now in place.

Councillor Boden declared an interest as he had previously been a Member of Cambridgeshire County Council. He asked a question about the 12-month trial period and what the metrics were on that.

Members were informed that the 12-month period was for this year and the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) said he was more than confident in meeting that target.

Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP, stated that the other Cambridgeshire district authorities had been persuaded to follow the same model that ARP had operated for fraud since 2015 and hopefully, this would become a long-term arrangement.

Councillor Cowen referred to the setting of targets as it seemed that all targets were being overachieved and he had been particularly interested in getting a return of £2.8m on a target of £1.3m in respect of fraud & compliance. He asked what the target actually meant and what it would be set at for this service next year or had something exceptional occurred this year.

The Head of ARP said he would be happy to take this away and discuss it further with the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) but

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explained that it was difficult to set a target as it was difficult to estimate the value of single-person discount fraud.

Councillor Cowen felt that ARP was incredibly successful in clawing back money from people who were falsely claiming single person discounts and assuming that this was publicised it should be a deterrent, therefore, the levels of revenue could be lower for next year.

Members were informed that there were two successful prosecution cases going forward which would be publicised and hopefully would be a good deterrent.

The Chairman felt that the target was not a measure of the work that the Team was doing it was an observation of the work that was ongoing, and this year more money had been recovered but further understanding was required.

The Head of ARP explained that this was a performance aspect in identifying where the fraud was.

Councillor Hind presumed there were percentages involved when these targets were first set and felt that it be easier to set a percentage figure rather than the amount.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that it was not just about single person discount fraud as other areas were also covered in this target within Council Tax, NNDR (business rates) and Tenancy fraud.

Councillor Boden said that it would be interesting to find out about tenancy fraud as this had a knock-on effect on all Councils.

The Head of ARP pointed out that such a matter had been included in the past and this would also be taken forward for consideration.

Councillor Boden felt that the more publicity the better.

Councillor Lay felt that twice as much money being brought in was very good but questioned the costs involved.

Members were informed that the Team had remained the same size apart from when additional partners had been taken on board. If more resources were provided, more fraud could be identified, although the Team was operating at a higher level than other authorities.

Councillor Lay felt that the Team should be increased so that further work could be carried out.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) agreed, but how much fraud was out there was difficult to value and manpower was not the issue it was more about intelligence.

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**ARP
Team**

The following actions were proposed and agreed:

1. How to get better future recovery from fraud and what impact this would have on each partner authority.
2. An analysis to be undertaken for Members to understand why ARP overachieved against its target and what could be done going forward to potentially recover further monies.
3. To establish how much more money ARP would gain if more money was put into the service and how much of it goes to County Council.

Councillor Cowen stated that authorities were not allowed to make a profit and therefore should form part of the analysis. More could be achieved if ARP could sell more of their services.

**17/23 ARP ACTUAL FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022-23
(STANDING ITEM)**

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

In quarter 3 a forecast overspend of £761k for the year had been forecasted, therefore a movement of £1,202k could be seen since the last financial report. The main reason for this had been the late receipt of £988k of Government new burdens grants, which had been previously reported but with no indication of values. In addition to this there was also increased enforcement income and a reduction in salary costs compared to the last forecasts

Further detail could be seen in Appendix A of the report.

Councillor Lay wondered why East Cambridgeshire District Council received the smallest portion of shares.

The Head of ARP explained that the factors that were taken into account were in the apportionment of partner shares.

RESOLVED that:

1. The report and appendix be noted; and
2. The final full year variance at 31 March 2023 be shared between the partner authorities in the approved shares.

18/23 ARP SERVICE PLAN AND RISK REGISTER

The Head of ARP presented the ARP Service Plan and Risk Register and provided Members with a detailed overview of the work gained by the Partnership and the increase in demand.

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Section 2.14 of the report showed the budget position, and Appendix A detailed the Service Delivery Plan highlighting the high-level actions that the service must implement to ensure that the varied demands on the service were being met.

The Cabinet Office conversations in respect of the DEA pilot scheme were still ongoing (see section 3.7 of the report).

Councillor Boden suggested a change to the Risk Register in terms of putting the risks in order of significance. He also mentioned the error made by one of the County Councils when they notified their precepts, and although he was aware that mistakes such as these could not be predicted, he asked if there were any measures that could be put in place to prevent such errors being repeated.

The Head of ARP said the change to the risk register matrix would be incorporated. In terms of the error made by the County, this was the first time that this had happened, but the figures would be re-checked with the County S151 Officer. It did not have an impact on annual billing as ARP was able to quickly re-bill at cost, fully funded by the County Council.

Councillor Cowen drew attention to section 3.7 of the report where the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) were threatening to restrict the circulation of data if particular requirements were not complied with and asked for an update on this matter.

The Head of ARP explained that this was in terms of the Memorandum of Understanding that all authorities had to sign up to, in order to receive securely derived data from DWP and HMRC. The timeframe for this year's MOU had been extended for a further month and ARP would be providing regular updates to OIB in due course. There was a risk to the partnership if access to secure data were to be removed given ARP's automation, but ARP was and would continue to work with DWP and HMRC to be compliant.

Councillor Cowen felt that this could be an opportunity to offer our services to other authorities who had failed and asked that the risk be captured in the risk register.

Members were informed that DWP had been very clear of what was required from local authorities but there were some areas that ARP would not be compliant and there were some new stipulations that would have to be complied with.

Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) stated that DWP were aware that no authority would be currently in compliance.

The progress in respect of the December 2022 Service Delivery Plan was otherwise noted.

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19/23 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

Lorraine King, Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP), presented the report and provided Members with further updates since the publication of the report.

The help to claim scheme with CAB had been extended for another year to March 2024. Department was considering support required post April 2024.

Following the move to Universal Credit trials during 2022-23, managed migration for tax credit only cases were commencing nationally. CEOs would be contacted 4-6 weeks before their areas were impacted.

At the end of April 2023 East Suffolk, Fenland and West Suffolk CEOs received notification that DWP would start to issue migration notices to households claiming tax credits only in July 2023. This did not include households in receipt of housing benefit and tax credits. Migration of Housing benefit cases would take place during 2024-25.

The tax credit only cases could also be claiming Council Tax Reduction and a partly automated process was already in place to re-assess these cases as they moved across to Universal Credit.

The estimated number of CTRS claimants in receipt of tax credits only in East Suffolk, Fenland and West Suffolk was less than 100 cases per local authority.

It was noted that DWP had held a meeting with local authorities and had been informed that ARP was not expected to be involved and to signpost to DWP.

From ARP's point of view, Councillor Boden asked if it would be easier if all 5 authorities were included in the same tranche.

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) explained that this would be dependent on the volumes.

The Head of ARP stated that the approach DWP was taking was unknown, but he had asked if the timetable would be repeated from this year, and they did not know.

The report was otherwise noted.

20/23 ARP HEALTH & SAFETY POLICY STATEMENT

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) presented the report.

The Policy had been reviewed and as ARP did not have any employees the responsibility for health & safety of ARP Officers remained with the four employing authorities; therefore, a Policy Statement had been produced instead (see section 6).

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Members' attention was drawn to ARP's responsibilities which could be seen at section 7 of the Statement.

It was noted that the Policy Statement would be reviewed as and when required.

Councillor Lay asked if the policies across the 5 authorities were radically different.

Members were informed that they were not, but it was ARP's responsibility to work with each authority to ensure alignment where possible.

RESOLVED that the revised ARP Health & Safety Policy Statement for 2023 detailing individual employer's responsibilities and ARP's role in the review of those individual policies be approved.

21/23 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

None.

22/23 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 12 September 2023 at 10am were noted. This meeting would be held via Teams and invites would be sent in due course.

The Head of ARP explained the arrangements for future meetings going forward.

A substitute would be required for Breckland Council for the September meeting.

The meeting closed at 11.40 am