

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 December 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 Philip Cowen
Cllr E. Back (Vice-Chairman)	Mr J. Schumann (Substitute Member)
Cllr Sarah Broughton	

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

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39/22 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.

40/22 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor Ambrose-Smith. Councillor Schumann was in attendance as his substitute.

41/22 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

42/22 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None declared.

43/22 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

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

Referring to the combined Partner performance on page 9 of the agenda pack, Members were informed that as an organisation, a strong performance

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had been gained by all partner councils. Overall, the report highlighted that all were on target except for Council Tax collection and Business Rates collection. East Cambridgeshire was fractionally down on its Council Tax collection rates but was being monitored, and East Suffolk Council's Business Rates collection was below target due to a large refund. The results of Quarter 3 would be available at the end of December and Quarter 4 would be very interesting going forward.

The Enforcement Team comprised of 7 staff members and at the end of September 2022 had collected debt of over £2m and fees of over £1/2m.

The Fraud and Compliance Team were going from strength to strength as a strong performance continued in the identification of fraud as shown on the table on page 14 of the agenda pack.

The Chairman asked if East Cambridgeshire and Fenland were any further forward with the County Council in respect of extending the fraud and compliance work.

Ian Smith, the Director of Finance (East Cambs) reported that a meeting took place with all Chief Officers, but an agreement had not been reached as yet. If the business case was approved, County would pay for the IT costs and each Council would receive funding to employ additional staff.

The Chairman also asked for more details about the large debt that Fenland DC had in regard to NNDR and if it was being paid.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that there was a payment arrangement in place which was being paid.

With the cost-of-living crisis and for those struggling financially, Councillor Cowen referred to the predicted performance forecast in respect of Qtr 4 and the additional burden on the teams to recover Council Tax and NNDR and asked how ARP would cope in terms of staff.

Members were informed that ARP would endeavour to retain staff and at the moment the telephone limits were on target but moving forward he was not in a position to state whether the Team would be able to answer every call on time and address future challenges.

Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP reassured Members as ARP were currently in the process of trying to recruit more staff despite the challenging retention and recruitment issues all were experiencing.

Councillor Schumann asked what the target was if it was amber. Members were informed that amber was almost at target. The methodology was then explained.

Councillor Schumann was not content with the response and asked how the targets were set and the target for amber.

Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) explained that the targets were profiled and based on actual collection in previous years. The target for year-end would be 100% of the target.

The Director of Finance (East Cambs) stated that each Council had a

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collection rate target within their Council Tax.

Councillor Schumann asked what the circumstances were behind East Suffolk Council's low Business Rates collection. It was explained that the company concerned could not operate for 3 months resulting in a rebate.

The performance report was otherwise noted.

44/22 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Head of Benefits, Council Tax Billing & Systems (ARP) provided Members with and update on welfare reform and highlighted a number of matters.

Expansion of Universal Credit:

Melton & Bolton trial 3-month deadline ran into the second week of August with one-month extensions given. A further 250 letters had been issued in July trialling a different approach and expanded into Cornwall. Harrow had now joined the pilot scheme as well as Northumberland.

Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) customers would be delayed until 2028. The plan to consider movement of pensioners onto a Housing Element had also been delayed from 2025 to 2028-29. Further updates were still awaited.

Discretionary Housing Payments:

Residual Discretionary Council Tax rebate funding had been used to provide additional targeted support to those who had successfully applied for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) this financial year with payments of between £100-£200 being issued ahead of the scheme closure on 30 November 2022. There was only a few hundred pounds left in the pot.

Benefit Cap:

It had been announced that the benefit cap would rise by 10.1% from £13,400 to £14,753 in line with Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) from April 2023. This would mean that 60,000 households would no longer be capped, 130,000 would receive more support and 30,000 would be out of the scope of the cap.

Welfare Benefit Uprating April 2023:

Government had ended the four-year benefit uprating freeze in 2020. However, the link between pensions and the triple lock was severed in September 2021 due to wage inflation. However, it was announced in the Autumn Statement in November 2022 that the State Pension and other benefits would be increased by inflation, from April 2023 - an increase of 10.1%. The triple lock would also be resumed.

Councillor Cowen asked if the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) were coping. He pointed out that Breckland Council had provided them with additional funding. Members were informed that ARP had a good relationship with the CAB and regular liaison meetings took place but as far as support was concerned no feedback had been received as yet.

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Councillor Cowen believed that in the next few months many people would be falling into arrears and was concerned moving forward as to whether local councils would be able to continue with such support as a non-funded government body.

Councillor Broughton stated that West Suffolk DC did provide a grant, but it was still not enough and now had less due to the 100% reduction scheme.

The Chairman said that Fenland DC normally helped the CAB but there was no funding left.

Councillor Schumann stated that East Cambridgeshire DC supported the Newmarket branch but decided not to support the Ely branch as all were now under the one roof and was now in-house alongside ARP.

The report was otherwise noted.

45/22 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23 (AGENDA ITEM 7)

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

The forecast at this stage showed an overspend against budget of £761k (7.7%) for the whole of ARP with £515k of this relating to the national pay award that had now been agreed, alongside inflation costs.

The New Burdens funding had not been included in this forecast as yet but once quantified the forecasts would be updated accordingly.

There was still a small amount remaining in the Transformation funding pot which had been set aside in previous years from low budget spend and grant funding. £47k was already earmarked for projects in progress and there was a further £96k available for future transformation projects.

Councillor Cowen mentioned the exchange rates challenges and asked if there was anything that could be done to reduce the costs in terms of software licences.

The Head of ARP explained that this was determined by the ICT Team at West Suffolk DC and could fluctuate, suppliers' costs had increased too but lower cost options were being investigated.

The report was otherwise noted.

46/22 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE PARTNERSHIP BUDGET 2023-24 (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Assistant Director of Finance (BDC) presented the report that asked Members to approve the Partnership budget for 2023-24.

The report set out the assumptions and main variances to the budget and included a savings target of £100k in 2023-24 increasing to £200k cumulatively in future years.

No questions were asked, and it was:

RESOLVED that the Partnership budget at Appendix A of the report for 2023-24 be approved.

**47/22 JOINT COMMITTEE SERVICE PLAN AND RISK REGISTER REPORT
(AGENDA ITEM 9)**

The Head of ARP presented the report.

The ARP had seen significant success in 2022/23 and the following areas were highlighted:

- the Council Tax Energy Rebates had been delivered achieving 100% main scheme payments by the end of June 2022 – five of eleven Councils to have done so nationally and the only Councils in the East of England.
- delivered the Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) scheme. In total over £17million had been provided to local business in rate relief prior to the end of September, utilising the available funds.
- Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support new claims and changes were all on target.
- Council Tax collection target had been met for all partners for the 2021/22 year.
- Non-Domestic Rates achieved collection targets for the 2021/22 year for 3 partners, but the target had been slightly missed for 2 partners due to CARF relief awards and backdated appeals.
- The further recovery work jointly funded by County Councils secured its best ever collection results of over £1,478,005 last year. This year, as at the end of September the further recovery officers had already secured £497,490 which was good progress considering current economic circumstances.
- The Fraud teams work, also jointly funded by the County Councils, identified nearly £2.5 Million in fraud and error last year, an increase on the previous year. The team were on target to achieve even higher values in 2022/23.

Income was forecast to fall short of the budget requirement for this year due to reduction in enforcement income. Following a system conversion and along with the impact of Energy Rebates reducing the number of cases passed for enforcement, income had reduced, but was expected to improve should the volume of cases passed through increase.

There was cost pressures on the budget for 2023/24 attributable to higher than anticipated pay awards for 2022 and next year, along with inflationary increases in supplier costs. An efficiency target had been set and ARP were working with the software supplier to implement further automation opportunities that would lead to future efficiencies, although investment through vacancy filling was required to make that happen. Vacancies would be kept under review throughout the year as the budget was sought to be achieved whilst managing rising demand due to inflationary pressures on the

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economy

It was noted that the Cost of Living and NDR property revaluation had been added as a risk to the risk register.

The options were highlighted.

Councillor Broughton referred to the 3 members of staff that had recovered over £1.5m and asked how many cases this represented.

The Head of ARP said that this data could be provided and would be forwarded to Members accordingly.

The Chairman mentioned the fraudulent claims and asked if this was still mainly in respect of single person discounts.

Members were informed that such claims included council tax relief, business rates but was primarily single person discounts. The process and prosecution costs were explained.

The Chairman felt that the message not to claim if not entitled should be highlighted further. Councillor Cowen agreed.

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR, Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) stated that it was mostly single person discount and reassured Members that those involved in the larger cases of fraud were prosecuted and taken to court.

Following a number of comments in respect of fraud, it was:

RESOLVED that:

- progress in respect of the December 2021 Service Delivery Plan be noted; and
- the revised Service Delivery Plan and risk register at Appendix B of the report be approved.

48/22 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 10)

Councillor Cowen suggested having the following updates:

- how ARP were coping in respect of staffing issues and workloads
- how the existing workforce were being retained; and
- an update on the New Burdens funding.

The Head of ARP advised that there was no timetable for when the New Burdens funding was going to be received but he would chase again before the Christmas break.

In response to offers of Member assistance, Members were advised that officers would take up their offer and they would be kept updated as necessary.

In terms of staff and pay, the Head of ARP pointed out that such matters were at the forefront of everyone's minds but vacancies were being filled as soon

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as possible, and in respect of workloads, there were additional pressures which were being constantly monitored.

49/22 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 7 March 2023 at 10am were noted.

50/22 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 12)

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Act.

51/22 PARTNERSHIP WORKING THROUGH SECTION 113 AGREEMENT - BROADLAND AND SOUTH NORFOLK FRAUD SERVICES (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Head of NNDR, Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) presented the report, that asked the Committee Members to enter into a Section 113 Agreement for ARP to provide fraud services for Broadland District Council and South Norfolk District Council.

Members were provided with a detailed overview of the proposed agreement and were asked to consider and approve the recommendations as listed in the report.

A number of questions were asked, and it was:

RESOLVED that the recommendations as listed in the report be approved; and.

RECOMMEND to each Partner Authority's Cabinet that the third recommendation as listed in the report be approved.

52/22 PARTNERSHIP WORKING THROUGH SECTION 113 AGREEMENT. - LINCOLNSHIRE FRAUD SERVICES (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The Head of NNDR, Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) presented the report, that asked the Committee Members to enter into a Section 113 Agreement for ARP to provide Single Person Discount Fraud services for Lincolnshire County Council.

Members were provided with a detailed overview of the proposed agreement and were asked to consider and approve the recommendations as listed in the report.

A number of questions were asked, and it was:

RESOLVED that the recommendations as listed in the report be approved; and

RECOMMEND to each Partner Authority's Cabinet that the third recommendation as listed in the report be approved.

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The meeting closed at 11.05 am

CHAIRMAN