

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, 12 September 2023 at 10.00 am
Virtual Meeting via Teams

PRESENT

Cllr Paul Ashton (Chairman) Cllr James Lay
 Cllr Diane Hind (Vice-Chairman) Cllr Sarah Suggitt (Substitute Member)
 Cllr Jan French

In Attendance

Sam Anthony	-	Head of HR & OD (Fenland)
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 District Council)
Matthew Waite-Wright	-	Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP)
Ian Smith	-	Director, Finance (East Cambs)
Julie Britton	-	Democratic Services Officer (BDC)

Action By

23/23 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

24/23 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor Cowen (BDC). Councillor Suggitt was in attendance as his substitute.

A further apology had been received from Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC).

Joao Santos a member of the public from Iliffe Media Publishing, was also in attendance to observe the meeting.

25/23 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

26/23 DECLARATIONS

None declared.

27/23 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Matthew Waite-Wright, Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP)

Action By

provided Members with a detailed overview of the Joint Committee Performance Report for the end of June 2023 Quarter 1 position.

He was pleased to report that in terms of fraud & compliance, the £1.3m target had been exceeded by £52,470.

Overall, all partner Councils combined were on target in all areas except for East Suffolk who was slightly behind target in respect of council tax collection. All targets were closely monitored and the position at the end of Quarter 2 was awaited.

The Chairman, Councillor Ashton, asked if East Suffolk's recovery rates were recovering or getting worse and if there was any further information available to show how Quarter 2 was progressing. He also asked if this was having an effect on all partners.

Members were informed that there had been no improvement since June and at the end of August, East Suffolk was still slightly behind their council tax collection target. However, compared to the same quarter last year, East Suffolk's collection rates were above target, benefiting from the Energy Rebate Scheme.

The Chairman was not surprised that during a cost-of-living crisis such difficulties were appearing and asked if he could have further discussions with the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) and Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) at some point after this meeting.

MW-W

The number of days to process Housing Benefit for Fenland District Council and West Suffolk Council for Quarter 1 was just outside of the 10-day target, higher than the previous year. This had been mainly due to the additional workload from administering the Council Tax Support Fund plus two alternative Energy Schemes. All three had been implemented at extremely short notice and at the busiest time of the year. These Schemes had since ended.

In terms of fraud & compliance, Councillor French said that she had asked on a number of occasions whether information on prosecutions could be provided and if such matters were widely publicised as putting such information into the public arena could discourage future fraudulent claims.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that there were a number of criminal prosecutions that were still on-going, but obviously cases could not be named, however, when a good result had been reached, ARP liaised with each partners Communications Team for possible publication. It was noted that Single Person Discount (SPD) was the main area of fraud.

It was agreed that such information would be reported in future taking into account data protection rules and regulations.

In response to a concern raised by Councillor Hind in terms of further explanation for West Suffolk Council's 'red' indicator for processing Housing Benefit claims, members were informed that as explained earlier, this was being actioned. West Suffolk was just outside of the 10-day target and focus days were being planned to concentrate on getting new Housing Benefit claims more up to date and improve the processing times going into Quarter

Action By

2 to hopefully get them back on target.

Councillor Lay had been very pleased with the sentencing of the Soham fraudster who had been found guilty of fraud against the Anglia Revenues Partnership and for the way it had been reported in the local newspaper by Illiffe Media Publishing Ltd. Councillor Lay, who also sat on the Citizens Advice Bureau for the West Suffolk area, advised that over the last 3 months he had noticed more and more people suffering hardship and somewhere along the line this would be highlighted in ARP's performance figures.

Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP advised that the operational impact to deliver the Government schemes in Quarter 1 could not be under-estimated, but the direction of travel was improving.

The Service updates as of June 2023 were then provided.

It was noted that the Enforcement fees that had been collected would be distributed in the usual way amongst the 5 partners.

In terms of Benefits, ARP was now automating 97% of changes in Universal Credit and had become a reference site for other supplier sites.

Work was continuing on the change of address automation project in terms of Council Tax and ARP Teams were working closely with the supplier to further develop the functionality.

The Chairman asked if this would include people moving to different districts. Members were informed that the technology was not there at the moment but hopefully it would be in the future.

Councillor French asked if new builds caused any issues and mentioned one of her constituents who was having problems registering their new home for Council Tax.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained the process that had to be followed. He was not aware of any specific problems but asked for the details of this individual customer to be forwarded to him so that this could be followed up.

Referring to Non-Domestic Rates (NDR), a new NDR Valuation List came into effect on 1 April 2023 where every property had been assigned a property value.

There had been a high volume of work undertaken in terms of ARP Systems and Digital and it was noted that historic database records that were no longer required were being deleted.

In terms of Fraud & Compliance, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) was pleased to report that the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub was now operational, and work continued to commence fraud work for Broadland and South Norfolk. Additionally, the implementation of agreements with Lincolnshire County Council were awaited regarding progressing SPD fraud with their seven district councils.

Referring to the Better Customer Experience Programme Members were informed that a new automated Council Tax moves (change of address form)

Action By

project was still on-going. Two move types were already live with further expansion due following a software update. These changes would hopefully improve collection rates and also cut down on paper applications.

The report was otherwise noted.

28/23 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

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

The following updates were provided:

At paragraph 2.1.15, DWP had been running a 2-year grant offer competition for future help to claim support from 2024 on a non-profit basis. The deadline for applications was 28 July 2023 and it was anticipated that DWP would have some news on this competition soon therefore the results would be publicised at some point in December.

At paragraph 2.1.16, under the summary of the current position on the expansion of Universal Credit, and at one of the liaison meetings, the Head of Benefits was made aware that Breckland and Cambridgeshire Councils had been included in the July 2023 tranche for migration of tax credit only cases. This meant that all five councils within the Partnership were making a start on their migration cases. Further updates were awaited.

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. An issue was raised that Breckland and East Cambridgeshire had not been notified and this had been identified by DWP and improvements to the process were being put in place moving forward.

It was noted that ARP had been providing local authority feedback via these liaison meetings by providing input in terms of the migration notices such as who should sent these notices out, how they should be sent and what information they should include – this was quite a key piece of work for ARP to be involved in and Members would be kept updated.

The report was otherwise noted.

29/23 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)

In the absence of Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC), Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP, presented the annual quarterly performance report as of 30 June 2023.

The forecast at this stage of the year showed a small underspend against the budget of £49k for the whole of ARP, further information could be found in Appendix A of the report.

Members were asked to note that at the date of this report, the national pay award had not been determined for local government. The forecast currently assumes the budgeted pay award for each council as shown in the table at section 1.2 of the report. Each 1% change in the actual award would increase/decrease the forecast and Members would be kept informed as new

Action By

information became available.

Members' attention was drawn to the Government's New Burdens' funding that had been received to offset the costs incurred for delivering the two energy alternative energy schemes that ARP administered.

A further £90,000 in funding from government departments was expected but this would be subject to a successful audit process of the scheme; therefore, this figure had not been included.

The budget for 2023-24 included an efficiency target of £100k, rising to £200k in future years. The efficiency savings for this year had already been achieved and steps were already underway to ensure that the increased target was achieved for the forthcoming financial year.

Referring to Appendix A of the report, in terms of the transformation funding, it was noted that a further investment of approximately £25k was anticipated to identify unrated properties; the exact value would be known following a procurement exercise. It was expected that the budget would be spent by the end of the year. If all the identified expenditure goes through in 2023/24 there would be £70k remaining for future projects.

Attention was drawn to the table at section 1.4 of the report. The table highlighted the share of the forecast outturn for each partner based on the ARP Joint Committee agreement. The agreement had different cost and income sharing splits for three areas of the budget, and as a result of the variances in the differing budget areas (such as Enforcement) the out-turn share for some partners was a surplus and for others was a cost.

These figures were anticipated to change not least because of the new additional New Burdens funding already mentioned but also other factors that would be forthcoming as the year progresses. Members would be kept informed.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

30/23 FRAUD AND COMPLIANCE TEAM TARGET REVIEW

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) presented the report.

He was pleased to report that the current target of £1.3m for identified fraud had already been achieved in Quarter 1 by collecting just over £1.35m; therefore, required reviewing, hence the proposed recommendation to increase the performance target to £2.8m.

The largest element of the fraud identified was in Single Person Discount (SPD) awards. Across the partnership, the collection funds for the 2023/24 financial year included just over £48 million awarded in SPD. A 3% target of identifying fraud in this area was approximately £1.4 million. When considering past performance and the likely level of SPD, it had been considered that a 3% target, although quite stretching was achievable.

The Chairman asked if this target figure was realistic.

Members were informed that 3% was a reasonable figure and the reasoning behind this was explained.

Action By

The Head of ARP stated that National Fraud Authority Bodies had estimated for several years now that 3% was the likely level of SPD fraud.

Councillor French asked what checks and balances were in place to identify new claimants and existing claimants to make sure that they actually were entitled to SPD.

The Head of ARP explained the process used by the in-house Team.

Councillor Suggitt asked if there was anything in place to prevent such fraud happening in the first instance by checking the application process and, if there was a better way for data to be shared.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that once an SPD application was made credit checks were undertaken to check the validity of that application by using credit agencies, and other data. This would then be followed by an annual review using external data to verify their liability.

The Head of ARP reassured Members that every application was checked but the Team had to rely on data as and when it became available so there was a slight delay but was processed immediately once the data had been received.

Councillor James asked how ARP was monitoring the change in properties from residential to commercial use.

Members were informed that in terms of domestic properties being used for Air B&B for example, and whether it should attract business rates, this did form part of the credit searches and therefore such properties could be identified. However, this was a growing issue mainly due to the cost-of-living crisis as more people were making their properties available for such a use, but the Team accessed available data with checks and balances to identify any discrepancies.

Councillor Lay suggested that Members could help in some way by being the eyes and ears in their towns and villages.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) was grateful for the offer and stated that any referral of suspicious activity regarding Council Tax or Business Rates would be well received and investigated accordingly.

The Chairman pointed out that if a domestic property was classed as a business, it would not be entitled to normal bin collections either.

Councillor Hind asked for the differences to be explained in terms of having to pay business rates and provided some examples.

Members were informed that if someone converted their garage and installed sinks, chairs and provided parking spaces to set up a hairdressing business for example, this would be subject to business rates. It all depended on the individual circumstances. To follow up on this matter, Members were also informed that through lockdown many businesses received grants for business rates with some people applying because they were running a business from home, leading to such premises becoming liable for business

Action By

rates.

Councillor French asked a question about charging Council Tax on empty homes.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that if the property was owned by a charity which many social housing landlords and housings associations were, properties were entitled to be empty for six months before council tax charges were levied. This was government legislation.

The recommendation to increase the performance target for the Fraud & Compliance Team was proposed and seconded, and it was:

RESOLVED that the performance target for the Fraud & Compliance Team be increased from £1.3m to £2.8m per annum.

31/23 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

Nothing to report.

32/23 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 5 December 2023 at the Innovation Centre in Thetford at 9.30am were noted. Further details would follow.

The meeting closed at 10.56 am

CHAIRMAN