

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, 5 March 2024 at 10.00 am in the
Virtual meeting via Teams

PRESENT

Cllr Paul Ashton (Chairman) Cllr Jan French
 Cllr Diane Hind (Vice-Chairman) Cllr James Lay
 Cllr Philip Cowen

In Attendance

Lorraine King	-	Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP)
Rachael Mann	-	Director (Resources & Property) (West Suffolk)
Adrian Mills	-	Head of ARP
Matthew Waite-Wright	-	Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP)
Ian Smith	-	Director, Finance (East Cambs)
Marie McKissock	-	Deputy Finance Officer (East Suffolk)
Julie Britton	-	Democratic Services Officer (BDC)

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1/24 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

2/24 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from officers Lorraine Rogers (East Suffolk DC) and Alison Chubbock (Breckland DC).

Marie McKissock was in attendance as Lorraine Rogers' substitute.

3/24 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

4/24 DECLARATIONS

None declared.

5/24 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP), presented the Performance report as at the end of December 2023.

All five authorities were above the set target for Business Rates collection and that position remained at the end of February. Council Tax collection was ahead overall; however, two authorities, East & West Suffolk DCs, were

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slightly behind by just under 1% of the collection target. The position had since improved for those two Councils, but both were still slightly behind target.

The number of electronic forms continued to increase and under fraud & compliance, the fraud identified had reached £3.1m against an annual target of £2.8m, exceeding the set target.

Each individual Councils performance was then provided.

In terms of Breckland Council, the target was slightly behind for days to process Local Council Tax Support as well as the Housing Benefit element. Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing, explained that a software issue had affected performance during Qtr2 and Qtr3 but had now been resolved. Performance had also been affected by the two energy schemes that had now closed; however, Housing Benefit process times had now improved since Qtr2 for all Partners. An ARP wide focus day had been held ahead of annual billing which had been successful and in February at the regular quarterly Liaison meeting, DWP had noted ARP's good performance in all areas compared to local and national averages and had conveyed its thanks to the Team.

Referring to the Council Tax collection for East & West Suffolk DC, the Vice-Chair, Councillor Hind, asked if there was a reason for these both being below target.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement said that it was difficult to pinpoint one specific reason, but as everyone was aware, there were cost of living pressures across the whole country but he assured Members that all partner authorities had been in a similar position the previous year and it had righted itself at the end of that financial year and he hoped the same would happen again for the end of March results. As far as processing was concerned, the recovery timetables and reminders were all up to date, but he was aware that in East Suffolk, Lowestoft itself had its own issues but a great deal of the outstanding debt had been identified in terms of Council Tax.

Councillor Hind thanked him for the explanation but felt that such issues would be across the board and not just affecting two authorities.

The Chairman felt that another factor could be new house occupations as this would have an impact on how much Council Tax was raised. The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement agreed, new homes were registered by ARP but there could be a slight delay sometimes of 2 or 3 months from the moment that the property was built to when a Council Tax bill was sent. The occupants could find themselves with higher bills to pay as Council Tax would have to be backdated to the time of occupancy. He pointed out that ARP had Officers monitoring new build sites and the debit was added into the equation.

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing assured Members that such a matter was being closely monitored. The Team was also looking at whether customers payments methods were changing such as moving from 10-month instalments to 12-month instalments to establish whether this was having an impact on the collection rates.

The same comments across all the different schemes applied to East Cambridgeshire DC. However, in terms of East Cambs fraud performance,

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following the funding from County for fraud & compliance, the figures identified for fraud was £778,820 compared to the previous year's total which was less than £100k. The same applied for Fenland DC, albeit slightly less but the funding received have had a significant impact on identified fraud.

Councillor French was concerned about the amount of fraud being identified and felt that more advertising was required to deter people from applying or claiming for discounts that they were not entitled to.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement explained that ARP was providing additional statistics to Fenland DC in terms of the position of the fraud investigations but agreed that perhaps some further advertising could be beneficial. He pointed out that a warning was already included on the Council Tax bills and that they could be liable to a £70 penalty. He would be happy to have conversations with all partners and their Communication Teams to establish what else could be done to advertise such issues. It was noted that Single Person's discount was the most widely abused in terms of fraud.

Councillor James stated that although £778,820 of fraud had been identified across Cambridgeshire, he asked how much of this amount had actually been recovered.

Members were informed that from that amount there was £410k of Single Person Discount fraud and this amount was added to the Council Tax pot to collect. The collection figures were roughly between 98% & 99% and that included the Single Persons discounts that had been cancelled.

The Chairman felt that it would be useful to report on how much of the fraud was being recovered. The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement said that this was a perfectly reasonable request, and would make some enquiries, and hopefully come back with a report at a future meeting.

In response to a further question about tenancy fraud, Members were informed that this was where ARP identified, with the help of Housing Associations, to carry out any investigations. A nominal figure was put on each property that was either recovered by the Housing Association for a fraudulent tenancy or an illegal subletting or where a tenant had been struck off their waiting list. Housing Associations were charged for this service and the figures were derived from the National Associations of how much it was worth for ARP to collect. The figure of £93k for East Cambs equated to 2 or 3 properties that had been brought back into public use.

To supplement the points made, Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP, explained that ARP had taken away an action to present a Briefing to Members ahead of the June meeting to define fraud and also highlight how much fraud was being identified and how much was being recovered.

As a follow up question, Councillor James believed that many Housing Associations had properties that they were not aware of being sublet and wondered if ARP's database had been looked at in comparison with the Housing Associations database. This suggestion would be taken on board, but it would be at a cost for ARP to carry out such a task.

For the remaining authorities, the performance and collection rates were very similar.

Action By**Service Updates as at December 2023**

At the end of the calendar year over £3.2m in debt repayments had been collected in terms of enforcement and just over £935k in fees. The fee element was paid back to the partner authorities.

The Further Recovery Team had surpassed the total amount monies collected in 2022/23.

For Council Tax, the major task that had been completed was the automation of web Direct Debits and refunds to improve the customer experience.

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

Collections for Non-Domestic Rates was going well, and each partner authority was above target. The small business rate reviews had been completed and the administration of the 4 bids throughout the partnership and 3 enterprise zones continued.

PDF attachments had been implemented for e-billing. Customers could sign up to it and have their bills sent via email with an electronic PDF attachment. This would hopefully reduce the postal costs.

Fraud & Compliance work had commenced for Broadland and South Norfolk, which was achieving some good results.

The Contact-Us form on the website had been improved capturing all required information including evidence all on the one form, and in one place.

The report was otherwise noted.

6/24 ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)

Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP, presented the Financial Performance report as at 31 December 2023 on behalf of Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC), who had sent her apologies.

The forecast showed an overspend against budget of £186k (1.8%) for the whole of ARP. This equated to a £45k pressure compared to the previous financial report. This had been mainly due to the National Pay Award increase and also, since October 2023, Royal Mail had significantly increased its postal charges by 18% as well as other increased inflationary pressures from all suppliers.

New Burdens funding had been received from the Government to off-set the cost of delivering the two alternative energy funding schemes and this had been included in the financial forecast.

The current budget did include an efficiency target of £100k, rising to £200k in future years. The 100k target had been met for 2023-24 and work was underway to achieve the £200k target that had been set in the budget for 2024-25.

Details contained in Appendix A were highlighted and the table at section 1.4

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of the report highlighted the share of the forecast outturn for each partner Council based on the ARP Joint Committee Agreement. The figures would most probably change at the end of March 2024.

The report was otherwise noted.

7/24 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

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

A number of updates for this quarter were provided.

The outcome of the bid in terms of the Help to Claim scheme should have been announced in December 2023 but had not as yet materialised.

A plan for the 2024-25 migration had now been decided and would be based on benefit types starting with Income Support case followed by Employment Support Allowance (ESA) with tax credits then Jobseekers. Housing Benefits only cases and Housing Benefit with tax credits would follow. A gradual movement should be seen in terms of Housing Benefit cases for this year and into April 2025.

Case estimates were still waited for the roll out plan. Work had already been carried out and the Team had some idea how this would turn out for the partnership. DWP had stated that it could only supply national estimated cases and not broken down by every authority. Guidance was still awaited, but in the interim an all-local authority conference call would be taking place on 15 March 2024.

Work was underway to determine New Burdens funding to support the close of the Housing Benefit claims.

The Team also continued to press for more information and timelines at the regular DWP & LGA liaison meetings.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) allocations for the financial year ending March 2025 would remain the same as the previous 2 years as part of the 2-year funding freeze.

The Chairman asked if any of the timescales mentioned were at risk bearing in mind the impending General Election. Members were informed that this should not cause any impact as the years programme had already been confirmed and communicated.

Councillor Cowen mentioned the Citizen's Advice Bureaus (CABs). He was aware that a number of authorities across the country were struggling with their finances and, unfortunately, one of the quick wins, would be to reduce funding to the CABs. Given the relationship with DWP, he asked if ARP was seeing any tensions across the Partnership with CAB facilities being withdrawn or reduced.

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing said that this was being closely monitored but currently ARP was not aware of any issues.

Councillor Lay stated that the CAB in West Suffolk had been overwhelmed

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with requests for help and East Cambs DC relied on the CAB in Newmarket and was working with them to find more staff to be trained to assist with the increase.

The Vice-Chairman felt that the CAB did an invaluable job, which was recognised, and she hoped that all Partners had been and would continue to support them.

Members were informed that ARP had its own Liaison Officer who did a great deal of work with all stakeholders including the CABs.

The report was otherwise noted.

8/24 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

As it was Adrian Mills, the Head of ARP's, last formal meeting before his pending departure, the Chairman wished him the very best for the future and a great retirement and, for ARP, to build on what he had put in place.

Councillor Cowen, as one of the longest serving Members on this Committee, and on behalf of everyone at Breckland Council, he thanked Adrian for everything that he had done in 'steering this ship' through what had been some quite difficult times and felt that it was to Adrian's credit that ARP was where it was today.

As a relatively new Member of the Committee, the Vice-Chair, Councillor Hind, said that it had become plainly obvious to her just how much work Adrian had put into the partnership, and she wished him well in his retirement, and thanked him for his sterling work. She was sure that the new Head of ARP, Lorraine King, would be more than a capable person going forward.

Councillor French concurred with all the above comments and wished him luck with any venture that he chose to do.

As one of the shortest serving Members on the Committee, Councillor Lay also thanked Adrian and said it was obvious to him that the Partnership had been in a safe pair of hands but was confident that Lorraine would take the reins and do the same.

Adrian thanked everyone for their kind and generous comments and thanked all Members for their support and the support for the Partnership and he agreed that he would be leaving ARP in very good hands with Lorraine.

9/24 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 18 June 2024 at 10am were noted.

The meeting closed at 10.40 am

CHAIRMAN