

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, 3 September 2024 at 10.00 am
Virtual Meeting via Teams

PRESENT

Cllr Diane Hind (Chairman) Cllr Jan French
Cllr Philip Cowen (Vice-Chairman) Mr A. Sharp (Substitute Member)
Cllr Paul Ashton

In Attendance

Lorraine King - Head of ARP
Sam Anthony - Head of HR & OD (Fenland)
Alison Chubbock - Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director
Finance
Theresa Mann - Principal Benefits and Council Tax Billing
Manager
Marie McKissock - Deputy Finance Officer (East Suffolk)
Katey Mills - Principal Fraud and Enforcement Manager
Ian Smith - Director, Finance (East Cambs)
Julie Britton - Democratic Services Officer

Action By

25/24 MINUTES

Subject to it being noted that the date under this item agenda number 1 was incorrect, the Minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

26/24 APOLOGIES

Although not noted at the meeting apologies for absence had been received from Matthew Waite-Wright, Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP), Rachael Mann and Lorraine Rogers. Marie McKissock was in attendance as Lorraine’s substitute.

Cllr Sharp (East Cambs) was in attendance as a substitute Member.

27/24 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

28/24 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

29/24 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

In the absence of Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP), Theresa Mann, Principal Benefits & Council Tax Billing Manager (ARP), Katey Mills, Principal Fraud & Enforcement Manager (ARP) and the Head of ARP, Lorraine King, presented the Quarter 1 Performance

Action By

report between them.

Each provided a detailed overview of all partner councils combined and service updates as at June 2024.

For Quarter 1 both business rates and council tax collection rates were above target, a significant increase compared to this time last year. The number of electronic forms received had increased by 10,000 again an increase compared to the previous year with over 18,000 electronic forms being received. The year-end target had been set based on the number of forms received in 2023/24.

In terms of fraud and compliance, over £1.5m had been identified

Service Updates

Enforcement

Overall debt collection had increased by 28% compared to the same quarter in 2023/2024, totalling nearly £1.5m. Fee collection had also improved with just over £400k collected in quarter 1. There had been a decrease in sickness absence which had a positive impact on performance. The use of Tel Solutions had been rolled out in June 2024 and had allowed correspondence to be sent to customers via digital methods and this solution had seen an increase in customer engagement compared to using standard postal methods which in turn had reduced the impact of postal costs increases.

Work continued with West Suffolk ICT to improve the ARP Enforcement website including improved visibility of the payment button and accessibility on a mobile device. The Team continued to progress on the rollout and use of the electronic forms to increase customer engagement and efficiency of processes.

Fraud & Compliance

As stated earlier, £1.5m had been identified in quarter 1. This was due to the on-going success with the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk Fraud Hubs and the utilisation of the National Fraud Initiative premium matching service for three out of five local authorities. The premium matching service is undertaken bi-annually in order for the output to be resourced effectively. The Project Team continue to move forward with the roll-out of Tel Solutions in respect of Single Person Discount reviews and work continued with ARP's partners and housing associations. The new ways of working for the Visting Team had led to higher than expected income identification across Council Tax and Business Rates. This was due to reduced number of visits, and utilisation of resources to source information.

Council Tax

At the end of the first quarter Council Tax collection for all authorities were either on target or within the 1% tolerance zone. Collection rates continued to be monitored, and work levels remained high. Several focus days were carried out in April and May of this year that had a significant impact on outstanding work. On average only 57% more processes were completed in billing and benefits during these focus days.

Action By

Work on automation continued with refund automation and change of address automation being successfully rolled out. The use of the new Contact Us form had continued to increase, and the council tax mailbox was due to close in due course.

Two Billing Team managers had been recruited as secondments within the ARP Team and their positions had since been backfilled. Six Council Tax Billing Officers had also been recruited as part of a joint partnership recruitment plan, managed by West Suffolk.

The promotion of paperless billing continued to increase efficiency and save on postage costs and the use of text and email contact had been expanded through Tel Solutions for council tax reminders and reviews.

Benefits

At the end of quarter 1, processing times for Local Council Tax Support were all within target apart from East Cambridgeshire; however, as a result of several focus days and changes to work allocation, but an improvement in performance was expected for all local authorities in quarter 2.

97% of Universal Credit notifications from DWP had been successfully automated. Universal Credit continued to be rolled out, and the migration of Employment & Support allowance (ESA) claimants had been brought forward from 2028 to 2025.

East Suffolk was taking part in a Discovery Project with the DWP with 155 claimants being issued migration notices ahead of the national timetable to enable the DWP to monitor the level of support these claimants might require.

Work continued with the Communities Team, referring customers who need financial/welfare advice, and a planned campaign to contact customers who could be eligible to claim Council Tax reduction was going to take place using Tel Solutions.

The Contact Us form continued to be expanded and in June, the benefits email inbox was closed, directing customers to use the form instead, a much more efficient process. In June, 76% of contact for benefits were either through the Contact Us form or other on-line forms, compared to 56% in May.

Further Recovery

This was a small Team consisting of 3 full-time Officers who specialised in the later stages of recovery, focusing on the collection of council tax and business rates where all other attempts of collection had failed.

The Team, in conjunction with Legal Services at West Suffolk Council, had successfully collected nearly £600k in quarter 1 and was on target to surpass last year's collection of £1.8m.

Non-Domestic Rates

Collection rates across all 5 councils remained above target at the end of quarter 1.

Action By

Work continued on reviewing the old debt and historic debts whilst keeping to the recovery timetable.

All valuation lists were up to date and in balance and a new NDR Manager had been successfully recruited with a start date this month in September.

Roll out of the Contact Us form continued with the NDR mailbox closure planned for the end of September.

ARP Systems and Digital

Work progressed on the E-Billing campaign. The Customer Services Team had been involved with some telephone services campaigns across the Partnership and at the time of writing this report a new quick and easy sign-up form was in its early stages but was now live on the website and was now available for customers to use. Requests that were coming through the system were being automated.

A number of social media campaigns had been planned and automated messages to those customers who indicated that they preferred to be contacted by email but had not yet signed up. Currently there were approximately 130,000 customers where an email address was held and as many of those would be contacted over the next few months.

A Hub page had been created to attract take up percentage for each Council and the facts and figures were being shared with the Customer Services Team. Increased savings would be realised once there was more take-up in terms of annual billing and would be in the region of 65p per bill that would go towards efficiency savings.

Options were still being explored for external mail provision, taking into consideration the data security involved.

Discussions would be had with OIB to look at other promotional ideas going forward.

The use of Tel Solutions, an automated telephone, text and email messaging service had been expanded in Qtr 1 beyond Council Tax reminders and Enforcement letters. Almost all Enforcement communications where ARP had the correct details were being sent via this method.

The next plan was for single persons discount to go out via email and text.

The Data Retention Policy had been approved and was being implemented from September onwards, the Telephony project was now in its final stages, and plans for 2025/26 annual billing was now underway.

The Chairman, Councillor Hind, felt that the 97% success rate in terms of Universal Credit automated migration was very impressive.

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Cowen, was impressed with the further recovery figures and felt it was good news but the flip side of that was that some people were clearly trying to get away with things they should not be doing. He felt that it was quite a dramatic increase compared to the previous year and asked if this was an underlying problem that needed to be addressed in a different way.

Action By

Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, assured Members that this was being monitored and more work was being done in the early stages of the recovery process such as sending more reminders, supporting the vulnerable and helping more with those people who could not pay aside from those who did not intend to pay.

The Vice-Chairman had noted that the biggest amount of £436k was not from domestic customers it was for non-domestic rates which was more about business failure or potential business failure as opposed to individuals with Council Tax arrears. The NNDR sum was quite significant, and his concern was that it was unsustainable and if that level of failure to pay continued across the partner authorities he felt that there could be other issues that could be affected and was this an early warning sign that there was a bigger problem looming that needed to be addressed.

The Head of ARP said that further work could be carried out looking at the business rates debt with the Further Recovery Team to see if there was more that could be done.

The Chairman pointed out that this was mentioned several meetings ago and felt that there needed to be more information in terms of how many days people were behind with their payments then Members would have a better idea of the success rate of those who were catching up and managing their debt rather than being in the situation of having to write-off large amounts of debt. If Members could see sight of those figures for the amount outstanding over a period of 90 days, not the individuals, it would be very helpful.

The Performance report was otherwise noted.

30/24 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)

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

The forecast at this stage of the year end spend was above budget of £114k (1%) for the whole of ARP. Further information could be found at Appendix A of the report. It was noted that within this forecast, the national pay award had not been agreed for local government and the forecast currently assumes the budgeted pay award at 3% or 4% for each council as could be seen on the table on page 42 of the agenda pack. This table also highlighted an indication of what any 1% change would equate to.

The budget for 2024-25 included an efficiency target of £100k. To date a small amount of £9k had been achieved, leaving £91k which had been included in the overspend. It was fully expected that the efficiency target would be achieved through the expansion of the text and email solutions that had been mentioned earlier in the meeting, saving on postage costs later on in the year.

The appendices on page 45 and 46 provided further details on the variances and these figures would be updated for Members at every future meeting.

In terms of e-billing, the Chairman asked if there was any information available on security issues as any data needed to be protected.

Action By

The Head of ARP explained that further work was being carried out with West Suffolk ICT in terms of any security issues and a document had been created that would be shared with Members via email in due course.

The report and appendices were otherwise noted.

31/24 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

Theresa Mann, the Principal Benefits and Council Tax Billing Manager, presented the Welfare Reform report.

The background and latest update in terms of the expansion of Universal Credit was provided.

The migration notices had been issued to pensioners and tax credits from August 2024 and customers claiming employment support allowance would be issued from September onwards.

In late August the Government announced its change to the eligibility of winter fuel payments and linking its entitlement to pension credits. As a result, the DWP was launching a pension credit campaign, this week being the week of action. DWP had asked local authorities to work closely with them to help them reach those pensioners who could benefit from pension credit and therefore continue to receive the winter fuel payment. ARP had met with colleagues from neighbouring authorities, county councils, Citizens Advice Bureaus and work continued with ARP's partner Community Teams to ensure that vulnerable customers were being supported. The website would be updated and making sure that everything could be done to support the campaign.

The Vice-Chairman knew that everyone had heard a great deal about this over the last few weeks in the national newspapers talking about the many people who were eligible but had not actually claimed. He had also heard about the complexity of the forms that people would have to complete and the challenges ahead. 243 questions was the number that had been 'banded' about, not that he believed everything that he had heard or read but asked if some context could be provided on the nature of the approach that people would have to take to look to secure this pension credit and be able to claim their winter fuel payment.

The Principal Benefits and Council Tax Billing Manager said that she had not seen the application form as it was in its very early stages but would be managed by the DWP.

The Head of ARP had not seen the form either but had heard that it was quite complex but there were various routes for customers to make a claim including on-line or via telephone. Additionally, ARP could refer people to the pension service although she was not sure how long this particular route would take.

The Chairman hoped that the process would be made easier.

Councillor Sharpe asked how much extra resource and cost ARP was going to incur with this decision in helping customers with help and advice.

Members were informed that there could be an increase in telephone calls

Action By

and changes to the website, but ARP was not able to carry out any target take-up campaigns as DWP would be doing these. ARP could do more generalised work such as putting articles in newsletters, local magazines, mailshots, emails etc as well as including a link in some of the letters that was sent to customers.

The Chairman stated that it was up to DWP as ARP could not be privy to such information in terms of data protection.

Councillor Ashton advised that Councils rather than ARP would have some awareness of housing benefit and wondered whether ARP could target those who claimed such benefits.

The Head of ARP explained that ARP could not specifically identify or target anyone based on any information that came through from DWP. From a housing perspective discussions were being had with various bodies including housing associations to try and identify people going into homes through their day-to-day work who come into contact with pensioners to encourage them to do the take-up work themselves and complete the application whilst they were physically with that person.

Councillor French had heard that it was going to take up to 9 weeks for these claims to be completed and therefore some pensioners would not receive their winter fuel payment until next year but was more concerned that this would cause ARP to need more resources.

The Head of ARP presumed that people would have to submit their claim by a certain date and therefore should receive their winter fuel payment, but many would not receive their payment when it was most needed. In terms of resources, ARP was currently setting up a group to deal with all the take-up work so that costs could be easily identified along the way and reported back to Members.

The Chairman felt that ARP clearly had everything in hand but to ask if any help was needed going forward.

The report was otherwise noted.

32/24 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

Nothing to report.

33/24 NEXT MEETING

There was some discussion about the next meeting in December as it happened to clash with another County Council meeting; however, following further discussion it was agreed to leave the meeting as scheduled. Members who would be unable to attend were asked to contact their substitutes to ensure the meeting was quorate.

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 3 December 2024 at 10am at the Innovation Centre, Croxton Road, Thetford were otherwise noted.

The meeting closed at 10.35 am