

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, 9 July 2024 at 9.30 am in the
Keystone Innovation Centre, Croxton Road, Thetford. IP24 1JD

PRESENT

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

In Attendance

Lorraine King	- Head of ARP
Alison Chubbock	- Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance
Theresa Mann	- Principal Benefits and Council Tax Billing Manager
Katey Mills	- Principal Fraud and Enforcement Manager
Ian Smith	- Director, Finance (East Cambs)
Matthew Waite-Wright	- Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP)
Sian Warren	- Deputy Chief Accountant
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

10/24 CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR

The outgoing Chairman, Councillor Paul Ashton (East Suffolk), in the Chair.

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 Chairman for the ensuing year.

Councillor Diane Hind in the Chair.

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

RESOLVED that Councillor Philip Cowen (Breckland) be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

11/24 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.

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12/24 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

13/24 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Jan French, Councillor David Connor was in attendance as her substitute.

Apologies were also received from Sam Anthony, Lorraine Rogers and Rachael Mann, Sian Warren was in attendance on behalf of Sam Anthony.

14/24 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

15/24 DECLARATIONS

None declared.

16/24 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) presented the Performance report as at the end of Quarter 4.

Business Rates for all five authorities were on target. Breckland Council and Fenland District Council were both slightly behind target for Council Tax collection but were well within the 1% tolerance.

In terms of fraud, just over £3.8m of fraud identified had been achieved, well above the year-end target.

An update from Katey Mills, Principal Fraud & Enforcement Manager (ARP) and Theresa Mann, Principal Benefits & Council Tax Billing Manager (ARP) was then provided.

The Principal Fraud & Enforcement Manager (ARP) provided her update first that included:

Enforcement

- More enforcement cases in 2023/2024 than 2022/2023
- More fees collected in 2023/2024 than previous year
- Debt collected in 2023/2024 - £4.5 million and fees collected - £1.3 million
- May 2024 saw ARPE collect the highest amount of fees recorded. This was assisted by ARPE's involvement in the ARP wide focus day
- Ongoing discussions with partners continued in respect of flow of cases
- Norwich City had given notice for enforcement services to end on 30/09/2024. This was due to a wider procurement exercise taking a more corporate approach to debt. ARP continued to communicate with Norwich to understand their requirements and how it could assist.

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Fraud and Compliance

- Fraud identification targets were exceeded in all areas for 2023/2024
- 2024/2025 targets had increased
- Work continued with Local Authority and County partners – part of the Norfolk and Cambridgeshire fraud hubs
- Funding from County had been agreed across all areas
- Work with South Norfolk and Broadland was progressing well
- ARP continued to improve processes and make use of current and emerging technology
- Future focus – development of a fraud prevention strategy

The Principal Benefits & Council Tax Billing Manager (ARP) then provided her update:

Council Tax

- At the end of the year overall collection for council tax was slightly above target.
- Council Tax collection would continue to be monitored closely throughout 2024 in the current economic climate, a similar picture was being reported by other authorities in the area.
- In January an ARP wide focus day was held which made a significant impact on the level of outstanding work ahead of annual billing.
- Work levels remained high, and therefore several focus days had been held in April and May to help deal with this.
- The development of generically trained Council Tax Billing Officers continued, to provide resilience in the team, allowing us to focus our resources where most needed.
- Great progress had been made with automation for refunds and web direct debits, work continued on the change of address automation project.
- The Council Tax Support Fund had been successfully administered, with funds being allocated in full for four of the five authorities and just 5% left remaining for East Cambridgeshire.

Benefits

- Quarter 4 targets had not been met for Housing Benefit or Council Tax Support.
- However, as the result of a series of focussed work in Quarters 2 and 3, the numbers of days to process Housing Benefit reduced by the end of Quarter 4 to just above the target.
- Focus days had been carried out in January and March to bring the number of days to process Council Tax Support down and the impact of this was expected to be seen as we move through Quarter 1.

Members were informed that the Further Recovery Team had collected £1.8m, an 800k improvement compared to what had been collected in the previous year, mainly due to the improvements in NNDR collection. A new NDR Valuation list came into effect on the 1 April 2023 where every property had been assigned a property value, this was a major piece of work for the Team but apart from a handful of appeals, the 2010 list was now closed. The Systems & Digital maintained a strong working relationship with Capita and some system enhancements had been made including automated change of address forms, and a new Contact Us form which had now gone live to

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reduce the amount of email traffic.

An innovative improvement had been made to the Telsolutions which had been a great success and was now a much quicker and much cheaper process. This was about contacting residents and sending reminders without producing paper. Automated emails were now sent to those people who were getting behind with payments and the Team was looking to expand this service into the Fraud & Compliance Team. Over the past 6 months the number of printed reminders had reduced by over 50% This had reduced postage and printing whilst improving collection. This same technology was being researched to introduce within NDR.

In response to a question, Members were informed that the Council Tax collection was for the quarter.

Councillor Lay asked why East Cambridgeshire District Council's performance indicators for both Business Rates and Council Tax collection was so high.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that this had been due to a number of people paying their Council Tax Bill upfront and he expected the position to alter in due course.

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Cowen, mentioned the software glitch that had caused some of these figures to drop and asked how the Team was dealing with this and whether this had been resolved.

The Principal Benefits & Council Tax Billing Manager (ARP) stated that it had been fixed but that it would take a while to get back on track.

The Vice-Chairman also mentioned the fact that ARP had little control in terms of Universal Credit and asked if the DWP had responded to this issue.

Members were informed that this was also related to the software glitch that had affected performance in both Housing Benefit and Council Tax claims. It was noted that quarterly meetings were held with DWP where ARP had been informed that it was above national average.

In terms of the Contact Us form, the Chairman, Councillor Hind, wanted to know what the average response times were, and in terms of NNDR she was curious as to how the debt had built up over a 3-year period and asked why nothing happened sooner.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement explained how the collection of business rates worked, which was similar to Council Tax where each March the bills were sent out and if not paid or an arrangement for outstanding payments had not been made, it would eventually be taken to court. There were many reasons for the lack of NNDR collections such as landlord and tenant disputes, some companies fail and cease trading and therefore if liquidated the monies were held back and took a while for such monies to be retrieved. For Limited companies, rates avoidance was a factor as they were their own legal identity. For Council Tax, some customers disappeared and could not be found. A number of fraudulent areas were then highlighted.

In response to a concern, Members were informed that the NNDR legislation was quite strong but if ARP was unable to make contact with the landlord or

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tenant it would go to court which was a lengthy process.

As far as the Contact Us form was concerned, Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, explained that the general response time was around 4 weeks but anything in relation to a direct debit query or complaint was looked at much quicker with a turnaround of a couple of days.

Councillor Connor found the point about liquidation interesting and was aware that these were generally Ltd companies. He asked what percentage ARP received in terms of the VAT and Tax as he felt 3 years was far too long and asked if this process could be tightened up to stand a better chance of getting the monies owed.

Members were informed that the procedures would be looked at as there was always more that could be done.

Councillor Lay asked if a report could be brought to the next meeting showing the companies that were more than 90 days behind on their payments.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement explained that if companies were more than 6 weeks behind, they would receive a Business Rates reminder so for companies 90 days behind Councillor Lay's request could be accommodated.

Councillor Ashton asked if this was all remaining constant or was it improving slightly and asked if Members could see sight of milestones not just the 90 day in arrears suggestion.

The Head of ARP said that she would be happy to take these suggestions away and perhaps provide some feedback on Council Tax arrears too.

Councillor Ashton pointed out that what he was trying to establish was some insight into where the issues were so that Members understood the problems moving forward.

The Vice-Chairman drew attention to Agenda item 10, the Risk Register, that contained some synergy in terms of Business Rates collection.

The Chairman felt that it was prudent to look at these issues more thoroughly and know the numbers at 90 days so that Members could ask the right questions.

There was no need for the names of the companies concerned.

The report was otherwise noted.

17/24 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)

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

The actual overspend for the whole Partnership was slightly higher than recorded at Quarter 3. The main reasons for this movement were: job evaluation costs at one partner council to bring their pay onto a more comparable position with others and a tighter triage on the cases sent though to the Enforcement Service during 2023-24.

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Careful management of vacancies through the year helped to mitigate the national pay award increases, with use of agency staff reduced from circa 5% of staff budgets in the last financial year to 0.6% of staff budgets in 2023-24. Further details could be found in the appendix attached to the report. The appendix also provided further details of the variances. It was noted that the efficiency target had been met and there was money available for future investment.

The Vice-Chairman was concerned about the drop in income when enforcement was an area that was growing and asked for a little more understanding.

The Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer explained that the debt collected was high, but there were two sides to this and might be better to join this reporting together.

The Head of ARP explained that this had been a really good year and more debt, and fees had been collected, but the impact was the adjustment for the net debtor in terms of the bad debt and this had been incorporated in the fees into the accounts. There were more cases coming forward, but these were moving through the system much quicker and was really about the number of cases that were still owed that affected the income, but this would be looked at more closely in terms of how to move the cases through quicker and in the best way.

Councillor Lay mentioned the loss of Norwich City enforcement services and asked what impact this would have on the Partnership.

The Principal Fraud & Enforcement Officer advised that discussions were being had with other partners.

In response to a question as to whether other companies more than compensate for the loss in losing a client. Members were informed that there would be a balance.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

18/24 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

The Principal Benefits & Council Tax Billing Manager presented the report and highlighted the matters of interest at section 2 of the report.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) established Universal Support to help people to claim Universal Credit and budgeting support to help customers to manage their payments.

Since April 2019 the Citizens Advice (CAB) had delivered Help to Claim support to help people make a new UC claim and manage their claim, up to receiving their first payment.

The Minister of State for Employment announced on 11 March 2024 that the Help to Claim scheme delivered by the CAB would be extended for another two years from April 2024. The support would continue to be provided through telephony and digital channels. Individuals who were unable to access support through these channels would be supported by their local

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jobcentre.

On the 15 March 2024 a session was held by the Local Authority Partnership, Engagement & Delivery, and Universal Credit Programme teams with over 500 representatives from local authorities. Following this, updated guidance was shared with local authorities.

The DWP intend to contact households by benefit combination order, rather than geography. Migration Notices would be issued to working age benefit households from April to June for those in receipt of Income Support; June to August for those in receipt of Housing Benefit only; July to September for those receiving income related Employment and Support Allowance with Child Tax Credits; Pensioners on tax credits being asked to move to Pension Credit would be contacted from July, with those being asked to claim Universal Credit being notified from August.

On 19 April 2024 local authorities were sent a letter from the DWP confirming the announcement by the Prime Minister to bring forward the migration of ESA customers to Universal Credit from 2028 to 2025. This will have an impact on all local authorities as this included a large number of working age Housing Benefit recipients. As a result of this the Team was reviewing the potential impact on its resources and workload requirements.

The DWP were carrying out some UC discovery activity in June, inviting a small number of ESA claimants to move to UC ahead of the national scaling in September 2024. It was potentially looking to carry out one of these pilots in East Suffolk, and ARP was currently in discussions with the DWP to offer its support, which would involve testing the enhanced support journey for these claimants. It was pointed out that DWP had chosen ARP to carry out this testing and 155 claimants had already been issued with Migration Notices.

The report was otherwise noted.

19/24 ARP SERVICE PLAN AND RISK REGISTER

The Head of ARP presented the report on progress in respect of the December 2022 Service Delivery Plan (Appendix A) for the 6 months ending March 2024.

It was noted that the Action Plan on page 56 of the agenda pack had been updated with June 2024 comments.

Attention was drawn to section 2 of the report and a number of highlights were mentioned and further details were provided.

Councillor Lay asked how many people were employed within ARP and how many were apprentices.

Members were informed approximately 280 staff were employed plus there were 11 people undertaking apprenticeships. It was noted that ARP was looking to employ an apprentice for the Council Tax post. Another 6 apprentices were due to start and with some vacancies coming up, it could lead to permanent employment.

Councillor Lay pointed out that West Suffolk had 35 apprentices.

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Councillor Ashton asked for the profile of the apprentices in terms of age, gender, and the health of the workforce as he thought it would be useful and asked if this information could be brought to a future informal meeting.

This was agreed.

It was noted that Norwich City had given notice for enforcement services to end on 30/09/2024. This was due to a wider procurement exercise taking a more corporate approach to debt. ARP continued to communicate with Norwich to understand their requirements and how it could further assist.

In response to a question as to whether Norwich City would be going out to Tender and would ARP be part of that Tender process. Members were informed that as a local authority, it could not form part of the Tender process.

The Vice-Chairman mentioned the increase in direct debit payments and asked how ARP compared to other authorities.

The Head of ARP stated that the percentage quoted in the report related to the volumes of on-line direct debit requests that were automated. Currently, 55% of these were automated and direct debit take up overall sat nearer to 80% and compared favourably with neighbouring Councils.

Councillor Ashton asked if it could be understood why the remaining 45% were not automated.

The Principal Benefits & Council Tax Billing Manager explained that it would depend on who had completed a DD form and was being looked at and further details would be provided at a future meeting.

The Vice-Chairman drew attention to the benefits chart on page 52 of the agenda pack and noted that the number of processes started were far lower than the previous year.

Members were informed that this had been due to the software issue.

The Vice-Chairman also drew attention to the amber score in terms of business rates on page 58 of the agenda pack. Looking ahead, he suggested trying to find where the pressure points were and react in advance and asked if there was any information available on the number of likely business failures going forward.

The Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement explained that there were two aspects to business rates, one was collection, and the other was the actual rateable value, and should there be a downturn in the economy the amount of money would actually fall partly due to the valuations that were coming in.

The Chairman reassured the Team that Members did not lose sight of the fact of how efficient ARP was and the whole Team was appreciated it was just about suggesting any improvements and asking the relevant questions.

Councillor Ashton asked a question about the rollout forms, and asked if the emails could be switched off as it was the forms that was capturing the data. He further asked how many of these forms were questions rather than data processing.

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Members were informed that preparations were in place but different external organisations as well as the customers needed to be catered for, but the emails would be switched off within the next month or two. In terms of the latter question, the number of general enquiries averaged between 4% and 5% and the majority of queries were specifically catered for with only a small volume being classed as general enquiries with the option of free text.

The Chairman said that she looked forward to hearing more about it.

The report was otherwise noted.

20/24 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

None.

21/24 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None.

22/24 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 3 September 2024 at 10am were noted.

This would be a virtual meeting held via Teams.

23/24 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

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 item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

24/24 HUNTINGDONSHIRE MANAGEMENT OF FRAUD SERVICES SECTION 113 AGREEMENT

Members were informed that although Huntingdon District Council had decided not to enter into a Section 113 agreement, the relationship between ARP and Huntingdon DC had strengthened and the work on different projects would continue.

The reasons were highlighted, and Members felt that although this was not going ahead, the process had been worthwhile.

It was noted that other authorities had expressed an interest in ARP managing their fraud services.

The meeting closed at 10.45 am

CHAIRMAN