

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, 18 March 2025 at 10.00 am in the
Virtual meeting via Teams

PRESENT

Cllr Diane Hind (Chairman)
Cllr Philip Cowen (Vice-
Chairman)

Cllr Paul Ashton
Cllr Anna Bailey (Substitute Member)

In Attendance

Lorraine King
Theresa Mann

Katey Mills

Catherine Monument
Alison Chubbock

Ian Smith
Tanya Sturman
Julie Britton

- Head of ARP
- Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager (ARP)
- Principal Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery Manager (ARP)
- Principal Partnership Support Manager
- Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance
- Director, Finance (East Cambs)
- Head of Service - Customer and Digital
- Democratic Services Officer

1/25 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

2/25 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors French (Fenland DC) and Horgan (East Cambridgeshire DC).

No substitutes were in attendance for Councillor Jan French and Councillor Anna Bailey was in attendance as substitute for Councillor Keith Horgan.

Apologies were also received from Sam Anthony and Lorraine Rogers.

3/25 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

4/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

5/25 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Katey Mills, the Principal Recovery, Fraud & Enforcement Manager presented the December 2024 performance report detailing performance to the end of

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Quarter 3., Business rates collection was above target for all partners, and council tax collection was above or within target for four out of five partners - below for East Cambridgeshire District Council. There had been a significant increase in the number of electronic forms received surpassing the numbers seen in 2023/2024, an increase of nearly 40%. Fraud and Compliance had exceeded its 2024/2025 target, partly due to the change in working methods by the Visiting Team who continued to proactively identify unregistered domestic and business properties.

As requested, performance had been added by quarter alongside year-to-date information in respect of Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) and Housing Benefit (HB) days to process. This information had been updated for all local authorities and demonstrated that, in quarter 3, all were within target in terms of days to process.

Enforcement and Fraud:

The Enforcement Team showed improved performance, with a significant increase in debt collection and fee collection. The percentage of overall debt collected by the Team in quarter 3 was 23.72%, up from 14.26% in quarter 2 – equating to just under £4.4m. This was an increase of nearly 37% compared to 23/24 performance.

Fee collection had increased by over 28% when compared to the same period last year with fees collected to the value of over £1.2m to the end of quarter 3.

The Team continued to use digital solutions to engage with customers and were now ready to receive sundry debt collection referrals from all partners.

The Team had identified fraud and error to the value of over £4.12m to the end of quarter 3, with seven successful prosecutions having been concluded and 13 other sanctions had also been administered. There were ten cases moving through the court system and two cases awaiting further action and there were 42 live criminal investigations as at the end of quarter 3

The Cambridgeshire Fraud hub would continue into 2025/2026 with funding confirmed, and work with external partners continued and the Team was looking forward to welcoming Maldon in April.

Further Recovery:

The Team consists of three officers who specialised in recovering Council Tax and Business rates where all other attempts had failed. £2.18m had successfully been collected by the end of quarter 3 surpassing last year's record of £1.8m.

Council Tax and Benefits:

Theresa Mann, the Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager, discussed the Council Tax collection, noting that it was above target for all local authorities except East Cambridgeshire. She highlighted improvements in automation, in particular the substantial improvement to the automated change of address forms and the push towards paperless billing continued. The use of the Contact Us form continued to be promoted, encouraging customers where possible to use this as the primary method of communication as it gathered all information and evidence at the first point of contact.

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Year to date figures for CTR had not met the target, partly down to the continued large number of claims that had been seen as a result of the continued migration to Universal Credit (UC). However, by reviewing work allocation and resources a real improvement had been seen in Quarter 3 processing times. This was a similar picture for HB claims but again, the focus on new claims as well as changes to work allocation and phone rotas has had a positive impact on the processing figures for Q3 which were now all largely within the target. 97% of DWP UC notifications continuing to be successfully automate, and collaboration with the Communities Teams continued, where ARP referred customers claiming Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to their local authorities' community's teams for financial/welfare advice and it was planned to expand this to customers at enforcement action stage at the start of Q4

Business Rates:

Collection rates were above target for all five local authorities. Targeted work on arrears was mentioned and were being dealt with in a timely manner. The work position continued to improve, and all valuation lists, and recovery cycles remained up to date.

A new NDR Manager had been recruited and had joined ARP in January. The Team was now fully staffed.

ARP Systems and Digital:

Catherine Monument, the Principal Partnership Support Manager, provided an update on ARP systems and digital progress, including improvements in e-billing with about 20% of Council Tax and Business Rates bills now being sent electronically. Since April 2024, 23,911 customers had signed up for Council Tax E-Billing, and 4,161 for Business Rates. Bills were now sent as PDFs via email, reducing customer contact compared to the previous portal method. The promotion of this continued with social media campaigns, telephone outreach, and a final push was carried out ahead of annual billing.

Customer Experience:

In December, over 12,500 online forms were received, with 73% automatically indexed. The new "Contact Us" form connected to other online forms, promoting automation. The use of the automated service for phone, text, and email messaging was being expanded. Most enforcement notifications were now being sent via email or text, and the use of automated messages was being pushed to encourage paperless e-billing. Future plans included automating messages for Business Rates and Council Tax Recovery, as well as for Council Tax Reduction, Single Person Discount (SPD) reviews, and reminders.

Councillor Cowen raised concerns about the potential impact of the recent government announcements in terms of reduction to benefits and the resulting increase in enquiries.

Although the timeline for this was currently unknown, Lorraine King, the Head of ARP assured Members that the Team was prepared to assist affected customers and provide support through various channels. The Government was talking about reducing disability benefits (PIP) which would have a knock on effect to anyone claiming CTS or HB.

Councillor Bailey expressed concerns about the large increase in business rates bills and the impact this would have on businesses.

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The Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager explained the Team would be monitoring the situation closely and would report back on any significant changes in collection rates and hardship relief claims.

Councillor Bailey also inquired about the lower council tax collection rate in East Cambridgeshire.

Members were informed that the higher target that had been set and other factors contributed to the lower collection rate, but overall, the collection rates were doing well. Some analysis had taken place which showed a combination of factors which had impacted East Cambridgeshire collection this year.

The Chairman, Councillor Hind, raised concerns about outstanding business rates and the need to monitor them closely.

The Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager assured Members that the Team was keeping a close eye on the arrears figure and would review and report back on the outstanding business rates, including any long-term debts, to prepare for potential impacts from changes in relief for businesses.

The Performance Report was otherwise noted.

6/25 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)

Alison Chubbock, Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC), presented the quarterly financial performance report based on the end of January 2025 data.

The overall forecast was an overspend of just short of £81,000, slightly higher than when this was last reported but it was still less than 1% of the overall budget and the appendix attached to the report provided the main areas of variance since the last quarter.

Although income was showing below budget, as highlighted earlier, the enforcement income was higher compared to the previous year although this was not included in the report it could be seen individually within the authorities' performance reports.

The appendix on page 51 of the agenda pack highlighted the amount of funding left for transformation projects and Members were informed of the need to review IT funding that may need to be increased in future years.

The Chairman asked if there would have to be a significant increase to funding.

The Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer explained that, the partnership, as a whole, put in just over £72,000 a year and so far this amount had proved to be sufficient but the future forecast spend could be up to £90,000 but split between the five partners it would not be a huge amount but this was something that needed to be closely monitored.

Councillor Cowen asked if the spread of service provision would have a direct impact on IT demand and needs, and if so, were the costs associated into any fee proposals being factored in.

Action By

Members were informed that any increase in costs would be included in the business case put forward to ensure that all additional costs were being covered.

The report and appendix were otherwise noted.

7/25 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

The Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager briefly summarised the key points from the report.

The latest updates included the move to Universal Credit (UC) and the fact that DWP was continuing to issue migration notices to households receiving Employment Support Allowance. DWP was also focusing on supporting those who had received a migration notice but were yet to move to UC, especially before tax credits closed in April.

The findings from the discovery project that East Suffolk DC took part in were as expected and had confirmed that customers in receipt of ESA were more likely to seek assistance to claim Universal Credit. The households that were part of the discovery exercise had all either claimed UC or were being supported to be able to do so, and to make sure that help was provided where it was needed, the DWP was investing a further £15 million in help to claim support.

The DWP was also in a discovery period looking at bringing together the administration of Housing Benefit and Pension Credit. All local authorities had been asked to submit a questionnaire to help the DWP understand what services they currently provided, and what the impact of any changes would be. Local authorities would be kept informed of the current position and updated regularly by DWP.

No questions were asked, and the report was otherwise noted.

8/25 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

None.

9/25 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 17 June 2025 at 10am at the Innovation Centre in Thetford were noted.

The meeting closed at 10.25 am