

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, 17 June 2025 at 10.00 am in the
The Innovation Centre, Croxton Road, Thetford. IP24 1JD

PRESENT

Cllr Keith Horgan (Vice-Chairman)
Cllr Jan French
Cllr Diane Hind

Cllr Vince Langdon-Morris
Cllr Sarah Suggitt (Substitute Member)

In Attendance

Lorraine King
Theresa Mann

Katey Mills

Sam Anthony
Alison Chubbock

Lorraine Rogers

Tanya Sturman

Julie Britton

- Head of ARP
- Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager (ARP)
- Principal Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery Manager (ARP)
- Head of HR & OD (Fenland District Council)
- Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance (Breckland Council)
- Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer (East Suffolk Council)
- Head of Service - Customer and Digital (West Suffolk Council)
- Democratic Services Officer

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Outgoing Chairman's opening remarks

Councillor Diane Hind (West Suffolk Council) said that she had been privileged to be appointed as Vice-Chair and Chairperson of the ARP Joint Committee for the past 2 years, the partnership was an excellent organisation.

10/25 CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR

The outgoing Chairman, Councillor Diane Hind (West Suffolk Council), in the Chair.

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

RESOLVED that Councillor Phil Cowen (Breckland Council) be appointed as Chairman for the ensuing year.

Councillor Cowen had sent his apologies for this meeting.

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

RESOLVED that Councillor Keith Horgan (East Cambridgeshire DC) be

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appointed as Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

In the Chairman's absence, Councillor Keith Horgan, the newly appointed Vice-Chairman in the Chair.

11/25 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.

12/25 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

13/25 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Cowen (BDC) and Ian Smith, the Director of Finance (East Cambs DC).

Lorraine Rogers, the Acting Chief Finance Officer (East Suffolk Council), had to leave at the start of the meeting due to having to take an important telephone call.

14/25 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

15/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Although not necessary, out of openness and transparency, Councillor Hind declared a non-pecuniary interest as a member of the Bury St Edmunds, Business Improvement District Board.

16/25 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Katey Mills, the Principal Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery Manager (ARP) presented the report and summarised the overall performance before moving onto the service area updates.

Q4 Performance Report

The report detailed quarter 4 performance to the end of March 2025.

Referring to page 8 of the agenda pack, Business Rates collection ended above target for 4 out of the 5 partners. West Suffolk Council was below target due to a number of large refunds.

Council Tax collection ended above or within target for 4 out of 5 of the partners. The potential contributing factors for East Cambs DC being below target included the highest number of refunds and pre-payments, and a higher target set.

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The number of electronic forms received surpassed the numbers seen in 2023/2024 – with an increase of over 72%.

Fraud and compliance had exceeded their 2024/2025 target and was partly due to the change in working methods by the Visiting Team who continued to proactively identify unregistered domestic and business properties. New increased targets had been agreed for 2025/2026.

The service area updates on page 34 of the agenda pack were then highlighted.

Enforcement

Performance within ARP Enforcement continued to improve. The percentage of overall debt collected by the Team at the end of quarter 4 was 35.92%, up from 23.72% in quarter 3 – equating to over £6.1m. This was an increase of over 35% compared to 2023/2024 performance.

Fee collection had increased by 25% when compared to the same period last year with fees collected to the value of over £1.6m to the end of quarter 4.

The Team continued to use digital solutions to engage with customers and were now ready to receive sundry debt collection referrals from all partners. Additionally, the Team continued to explore opportunities in respect of e-forms to continue to increase customer engagement.

Fraud and Compliance

The Team had identified fraud and error to the value of over £4.6m to the end of quarter 4. Twelve successful prosecutions had been concluded, and fifteen other sanctions had also been administered. There were currently seven cases currently moving through the court system and there were 42 live criminal investigations as at the end of quarter 4.

The Cambridgeshire Fraud hub would continue into 2025/2026 with funding confirmed. Work continued with external partners, and the Team was currently working with Maldon DC to welcome them on board as a new fraud partner.

Further recovery

The Team consisted of three officers who specialised in recovering Council Tax and Business rates where all other attempts had failed and had successfully collected over £2.8m by the end of quarter 4 surpassing last year's record of £1.8m.

Councillor French asked if the ARP Members could be informed of the successful prosecutions.

The Principal Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery Manager (ARP) said that she would be happy to send the information to Members now that the press releases had been submitted.

Theresa Mann, the Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP), then provided Members with an update on the following performance areas.

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Council Tax

At the end of quarter 4 Council Tax collection was above the target for all partners with the exception of East Cambridgeshire. We continue to receive high levels of work and closely monitor our resources to ensure efficiency.

Work on automation continued, with improving results in the change of address automation in particular.

The Team continued to expand the use of the 'Contact Us' form as the most efficient way for customers to communicate with ARP. Work also continued on the e-billing campaign, to increase the number of customers receiving their council tax bills by email, which, alongside the soft email and text reminders, have reduced postage costs and increased customer engagement.

Benefits

Although the year-to-date processing times for Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit had not met the targets at the end of 2024/25, a real improvement had been seen in the quarterly processing times, which were all within the target for quarter 4.

As the move to Universal Credit from legacy benefits continued to be rolled out by the DWP, the Team continued to successfully automate 97% of Universal Credit notifications.

The Communities Team initiative had expanded, to include customers who have cases with ARP Enforcement, to refer them to receive holistic support.

Work also continued to proactively contact customers who might be eligible to reclaim Council Tax reduction, and the Team liaised with partners to support pension credit take up campaigns.

Business Rates

Business rates collection remained within the target at the end of quarter 4. A keen focus continued on arrears and credits, and the work position continued to improve.

The team was now fully staffed and the new NDR Manager who started in January 2025 was settling in well.

ARP Systems and Digital

The e-billing campaign continued successfully throughout quarter 4, increasing the percentage of customers who received a bill by PDF attachment to an email, to 23% for council tax, and 30% for business rates.

Work was carried out to increase automation of Direct Debit forms completed online, and an automated refund process for non-Direct Debit customers was being tested, which would make it easier and quicker for refunds to be processed.

Year-end processing and annual billing had been carried out successfully, with all postal bills being issued in time to be issued by economy post. The process of issuing all e-bills also went smoothly.

Better Customer Experience Programme

The 'Contact Us' form project continued to reduce the number of emails received, and provided a quicker, more efficient means for customers to communicate with ARP.

Social media and email campaigns to highlight paperless billing continued throughout quarter 4 with a planned programme of events for 2025-26.

A customer service standard was approved in quarter 4, and training was currently being rolled out across ARP and the Customer Services Team.

In response to a concern, the Principal Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery Manager (ARP) explained that whilst the increase in cost of living may have had an impact the main reason that more fraud had been identified was improved systems and processes and wider access to data and intelligence.

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Horgan, thanked the Officers for their report and also thanked the Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP) who had personally helped him with an issue in his Ward which had been satisfactorily resolved.

The Performance report was otherwise noted.

17/25 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2024-25 (STANDING ITEM)

Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC), presented the Financial Performance report which was for Members to note.

The report highlighted the full year financial position with a below budget spend of £216k (1.9%) for the whole of the ARP.

The details of the variances could be seen at Appendix A of the report. The appendix also highlighted that the transformation programme was now fully funded and had been allocated to projects taking place over the coming year; therefore, any transformation projects in future years would require funding from elsewhere and this would be considered at the next budget setting at the December meeting.

The table at section 1.4 of the report showed the share of the out-turn for each partner authority based on the ARP Joint Agreement.

It was noted that the main reason for the below budget spend had been due to employee related costs

Councillor Hind asked if it would be better for the partners' shares to remain in the budget if funding was required for future transformation projects.

The Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC) explained that the accounts had already been completed therefore the decision had already been made to share the surplus to all partners in December. However, individual councils were allowed to keep that money in a separate budget pot for ARP use.

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The Vice-Chairman felt it was a very difficult task to get close to a budget but to be under budget with a 1.9% variation was to be congratulated.

The report was otherwise noted.

18/25 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

The Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP) presented the Welfare Reform report and summarised the following key points.

- Universal Credit expansion continued, and Tax credits had now ended.
- The Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) was increasing the number of migration notices issued to Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) claimants. DWP had invested in help to claim support for these most vulnerable customers.
- The administration of Housing Benefit and Pension Credit would be brought together for new claimants and had been brought forward from 2028 to 2026.
- The DWP was in a discovery period, to understand local welfare provision, and gauge the effects of more centralised pensioner benefit delivery.
- Changes to disability benefits had been announced, including changes to eligibility for Personal Independence Payments (PIP).
- The government was consulting on supported housing, with a focus on licensing and potentially linking this to housing benefit.

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Horgan, felt that the subject of welfare reform was very interesting and was sure that this was being dealt with in a very sensitive manner.

**19/25 JOINT COMMITTEE SERVICE PLAN AND RISK REGISTER UPDATE
REPORT JUNE 2025**

Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, presented the Joint Committee Service Plan and Risk Register update report for June 2025.

In accordance with the ARP agreement a revised Service Delivery Plan for the new financial year should be agreed by the Joint Committee by the end of December of the previous year and delivery of the plan to be reviewed every 6 months.

A Service Delivery Plan for 2024/25 had been agreed in December 2023 and this report provided an update on progress as could be seen by the current Service Plan as detailed in Appendix A and the accompanying Service Plan update at Appendix B.

This update reported on progress in respect of performance, workloads, audit and the partnership's five strategic priorities: Customers, Relationships, Colleagues, Digital and Sustainability.

The new style Service Delivery Plan for 2025/26 at Appendix B had recently come into effect from April 2025, and the Head of ARP highlighted progress against targets in a number of areas.

Work volumes this year had remained fairly static for Council Tax Billing; however, an increase in overall work items had been seen including NDR work

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items of almost 5,000 equating to 15% and an additional 4,000 additional items for the Benefits team. This included a 21% increase in Universal Credit Data files received, that equated to an additional 51,000 records per year. Total workloads across the partnership had increased by 4% for 2024-25 compared to 2023-24.

An additional 3,644 migration notices to Universal Credit had been received this year. The graphs on page 53 of the agenda pack highlighted the increase in benefits workload but ended the year completely up to date with new Council Tax Support claims. Billing processed had been similar to last year, but ARP was slightly more up to date for this year too. Billing call handling had exceeded the 90% target throughout the 2024-25 financial year with an average handling rate of 96.58% and overall collection rates across the partnership for Council Tax and Business Rates was 99.94% against target.

ARP's own inhouse Enforcement Team had achieved a 25% higher collection of fees during 2024-25 and had collected 35% more debt than the previous year (6.1m in total).

The days to process new Housing Benefit and Council Tax reduction claims were outside of the year-to-date targets for all partners at the end of Qtr 4 but monthly charts would be included going forward and therefore the quarterly performance would be compared to the target rather than the year-to-date.

In total this year there had been 109 potential data breaches reports with 95 being considered an actual breach but as they were all low risk, they were not reported to the Information Commissioners Office (ICO).

ARP was currently working collaboratively with Communities' Teams on a new project to signpost and make direct referrals to facilitate multi-agency, wrap around support where vulnerability was identified. The approach, that started as a pilot with Breckland Council, was now being rolled out to all partners and was going well,

Throughout 2024-25 the number of emails received had been reduced by 8,000 per month and the number of on-line forms received increased by 11,000 a month.

Work with ARP's Customer Strategy Group and Customer Tactic Group had brought improvements such as an aligned complaints process, a review of letter templates and more recently a new approved set of ARP Customer Service Standards.

Support Function Groups have continued to be developed and expanded with the introduction of a new Housing Task and Finish group earlier this year and the introduction of a new dashboard performance data for the Housing, Management Team, Finance and HR groups.

Fraud and Enforcement services continued to be provided to a number of local authority partners and Housing Associations, and Maldon Council had been welcomed as a new external partner in April 2025. Other opportunities were currently being explored.

The five new Staff Support Network Groups were going well with some having guest speakers lined up. Also, a rolling programme of technical coffee and chats had been introduced, and some discussions had been around the future

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of ARP in terms of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

ARP currently had one apprentice role, and a further twelve studying for apprenticeships linked to the professional IRRV, management or counter fraud investigator qualifications and other options were being explored for apprenticeships across all teams

In October 2024 ARP had been honoured to win the National IRRV award for Revenues and/or Local Taxation Team of the Year. ARP had also been shortlisted for the LGC award in Innovation but unfortunately had not been winners on this occasion but to be recognised nationally was a great achievement and a great honour.

In terms of digital solutions, ARP had recently been able to extend the automation of change of address records from approximately 20% to 67%. Details of the current automation success compared to October 2024 had been included within a table on page 61 of the agenda pack.

Automation of HRMC earnings and data had been reduced due to moving to UC.

PDF email attachment bills campaign has had an extensive take-up with over 42,000 residents and 7,300 businesses sign up during 2024-25 realising savings of over £42k and with all most £29k saved at annual billing alone. Further take-up events were planned for 2025-26.

A thorough review of transformation and innovation against resource and progress of projects across the partnership resulted in a 12-month programme of initiatives being approved for 2025-26.

In terms of sustainability on page 62 of the agenda pack, this year, in collaboration with each partner's Housing Teams, a risk-based approach had been taken again to target empty properties where data indicated occupation. This approach had reduced visits by 79% and had found that 48% of properties visited were found to be occupied compared to 38% the previous year.

A review of the Visiting Officer function in 2023 had proved successful. Utilising desk-based intelligence had streamlined the process and freed up resource, previously spent travelling, allowing ARP to implement a project to utilise innovative approaches to identify properties that were not in the tax base. Since April 2024 this project had identified over £1.57 million of additional income from new residential and business properties.

Despite increasing workloads ARP's overall establishment complement had reduced by around 6.5% since 2019, saving over £700,000 and a further 1.5 FTE efficiencies had been included in the 2025-26 budget. An ongoing review of overall ARP work volumes and the impacts on changing resource requirements in each team was underway to help forecast future needs.

Councillor French asked what steps were being taken in terms of LGR and highlighted the 3 preferred options that had been put forward across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The Head of ARP explained that she was trying to keep everyone informed and up to date and was starting to get involved in different workshops with each partner authority and providing data to be included in the final business plans.

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The Head of ARP was confident that there would be opportunities for the partnership, and she was trying to keep the Teams up to date as it was still an unsettling time for everyone.

Councillor Hind mentioned that the government was introducing new rules about ombudsman and fraud and asked if ARP had been invited to take part in the survey which closes on 21 July 2025.

The Principal Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery Manager (ARP) said that she had seen sight of this and would include any necessary feedback through the Enforcement Conduct Board.

Councillor Langdon-Morris (East Suffolk) mentioned the second homes premium in East Suffolk and how this had impacted on the Team.

The Head of ARP stated that she had been in contact with East Suffolk DC and the Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager had been brought up to date too as well as being discussed at a recent OIB meeting.

Members were informed that a number of complaints for 2nd homes premiums had been received for East Suffolk since April 2025.

Councillor Langdon-Morris asked the Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager to go through the detail with him after the meeting.

Councillor Horgan, the Vice-Chairman thanked the Head of ARP and her Team for the information provided. He was aware that everyone was reasonably concerned about LGR and for the next 12 to 24 months he extended an invitation to all Members if they needed access to answers and Officers were invited to come back to Members as conduits for the organisation.

The email from the government about the introduction of new rules about ombudsman and fraud as mentioned earlier was found and the survey would be completed accordingly.

The report was otherwise noted.

20/25 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

In response to a question about electronic bills and what was being done to improve this method of communication. Members were informed that ARP was doing more social media campaigns and also had a planned programme for continuous improvements, particularly to attract more business rates customers that currently stood at 30%.

The Head of ARP explained that the target for this year was 45% but next year this would be increased to 60%.

21/25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Langdon-Morris referred to some of the Local Government Reform messages and communications and asked if ARP was going to consider adding some information to their forms to enable the public to take part in the survey as he felt that it was imperative to spread the word.

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The Head of ARP said she would pick this up and pointed out that the link to the survey could be included in the forms but on the actual bills that were sent out there was limited space.

The Vice-Chairman stated that with limited space available and multiple consultations he did not want to overburden ARP.

22/25 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the **virtual** meeting via Teams on Tuesday, 9 September 2025 at 10am were noted.

The meeting closed at 11.00 am

CHAIRMAN