

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL
FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL
WEST SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

Agenda Item 10

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES & BENEFITS JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Tuesday, 9 September 2025 at 10.00 am in the
Virtual meeting

PRESENT

Cllr Philip Cowen (Chairman)	Cllr Jan French
Cllr Diane Hind	Cllr Anna Bailey (Substitute Member)
Cllr Vince Langdon-Morris	

In Attendance

Lorraine King	- Head of ARP
Theresa Mann	- Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager (ARP)
Katey Mills	- Principal Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery Manager (ARP)
Alison Chubbock	- Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance (BDC)
Jude Antony	- Principal Accountant & Deputy S151 Officer (East Cambs DC)
Anna Goodall	- Assistant Director (Fenland DC)
Lorraine Rogers	- Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer (East Suffolk DC)
Tanya Sturman	- Head of Service - Customer and Digital (West Suffolk DC)
Aimee Rawe	- Benefits Team Manager (ARP)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer (BDC)

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23/25 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

24/25 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Keith Horgan. Cllr Anna Bailey was in attendance as his substitute.

25/25 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

26/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

27/25 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Katey Mills, the Principal Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery Manager (ARP), presented the June 2025 performance report that detailed the performance for each partner authority to the end of quarter 1. The overall performance

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was summarised before moving onto specific service area updates.

Q1 Performance Report

The performance of all partner councils combined for business rates and council tax collections was within target for ARP as a whole.

The number of electronic forms received continued to increase with a 63% increase seen compared to quarter one of 2024/25.

The fraud and compliance targets had been increased as previously agreed to £4.5m and performance thus far puts the Team on track to achieve this new target by the end of the year.

Enforcement

Moving on to service area updates, and in terms of enforcement, the Enforcement Team had a good start to the year with over £1.4 million in debt collected in quarter one; a 3.61% increase compared to the same quarter last year. Additionally, over £420,000 of fees were collected in quarter one; again, an increase of 4% compared to the same period last year and 37% compared to the same quarter in 2023/24.

The Team continued to take proactive steps to engage with customers as early in the enforcement process as possible.

Fraud and Compliance

The Fraud Team had identified fraud and error to the value of £1.7m by the end of the first quarter. One successful prosecution had been undertaken and had been concluded, and six cases of fraud were still working their way through the court system. 55 live investigations were still ongoing, and the Team was working to implement civil penalties, liaising with the Systems Team and ARP's software provider.

Positive work continued with external partners and work was progressing at pace with Maldon District Council the most recent external fraud partner.

Further Recovery

In terms of further recovery, the Team had collected over £527,000 in debt in the most difficult council tax and business rates cases. The Team's performance in quarter one was in line with their 2024/25 performance.

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

Council Tax

At the end of quarter one, council tax collection was within the tolerance of the target collectively for all local authorities with Breckland Council and East Suffolk District Council just dipping slightly under their targets at the end of quarter one. Collection levels continued to be closely monitored, and potential reasons were being explored as to why these collection rates were lower than expected such as the impact of some customers moving from 10

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instalments to 12 instalments per year.

Work levels remained high in the Council Tax Billing Team and resources and workloads were being closely monitored to ensure that all were working as efficiently as possible.

Work continued on automation and there was particular focus on continuing to improve change of address and refund automation. Multimedia messaging was being utilised to issue soft text and e-mail reminders ahead of paper reminders for council tax bills, as well as sending e-mail invites for customers to sign up for E billing.

Benefits

At the end of quarter one year to date, processing times for both council tax support and housing benefit were within the target. This was partly due to the continued focus on work monitoring and resource allocation within the Team. 97% of Universal Credit notifications from the DWP had been successfully automated. The Communities Team initiative continued to expand with referrals being made from the Discretionary Housing Payments Team, Team Managers and the Enforcement Team to the local authorities Communities Teams for holistic support for customers.

The Partnership was also continuing to utilise multimedia messaging to issue text and e-mail invitations

Business Rates

At the end of quarter one the combined business rates collection was within the tolerance target for all local authorities, with West Suffolk DC dipping slightly under their target.

The Team had continued to have a keen focus on dealing with arrears as well as historic credits and the work position was improving overall with recovery cycles being maintained and the Valuation Office Agency schedules updated.

A project had been launched to issue soft e-mail reminders ahead of paper reminders in the same way that the Council Tax Billing Team was doing, which should see an increase in engagement and also a reduction in postage costs.

Work had started on planning for the upcoming business rates changes taking effect from April 2026, which included transformation of the multiplier system and a revaluation as well as new relief schemes.

ARP Systems and Digital

The Team continued to support many of the projects across the Partnership, including the E billing campaign, the automation of council tax refunds, multimedia messaging campaigns and plans for the upcoming business rates changes amongst many others.

Better Customer Experience Programme

The Contact Us form that linked to other online forms continued to reduce the numbers of emails received. The Enforcement Team was exploring how

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payment links could be generated in texts or emails sent to customers, which would enhance the customer experience by improving the payment methods available.

The planned programme of events continued to increase the number of customers signing up to paperless billing, including the use of the Contact Finder function which gathered e-mail addresses available in the public domain.

A trial of a customer survey using Telsolutions had been launched to obtain feedback on the forms, and the results would be analysed before expanding this further.

Questions were then invited.

Councillor French mentioned a press release that Fenland had issued a few weeks ago highlighting the amount of fraud and the money collected which had proved a great success as the public had been unaware of the vast amount of fraud that authorities had to deal with.

The Chairman, Councillor Phil Cowen, said that this was something that had been discussed for some time - actually publicising what the Partnership had been able to achieve in terms of dealing with fraud, and as the sums were quite significant, he felt that they should be put out in the public arena.

He had heard earlier in the meeting that it could be the shift from 10 to 12 monthly payments that had altered some of the collection rates and asked if there was any indication that this was the reason for the downward trend.

The Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP) stated that this was being monitored but the pattern had continued over the past few months which was unusual. She had also liaised with other authorities, and they were all reporting a very similar picture to ARP. There had been an increase in customers moving from 10 to 12 instalments which would make a difference in how the council tax was collected.

Additionally, the Valuation Agency was taking its time to band new properties, and with the growth in housing predicted for councils, it was going to take longer for ARP to be able to collect the council tax.

Referring to the last point, the Chairman was concerned that if residents of newly built properties were unaware of the council tax band and therefore unable to make any payments towards their council tax until much later in the year, surely this put a huge burden on local authorities as well as a huge burden on the families involved if they were suddenly told that they had to pay a significant sum in backdated council tax. He asked if there was any way to provide these families with an indication of what their council tax might be so that arrangements could be made to accrue the funds to support them.

The Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP) explained that when ARP was informed of newly built properties, they were then reported to the Valuation Office for banding. The customers were also contacted asking them if they wanted to make voluntary payments towards their council tax and to set up direct debits to prevent a large, backdated council tax bill.

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The Chairman was pleased with the arrangement but asked if this was being publicised as people needed to be made aware.

Members were informed that ARP wrote to the customer in a property that was not banded to inform them of their options.

Councillor Hind asked if people were already set up paying their council tax in 10 monthly instalments were they automatically moved to 12 monthly payments or did they have to opt in for that themselves.

In response, Members were informed that the customer had to request to pay 12 instalments themselves, it was not automatic.

Councillor Hind felt it was good to let customers have the choice.

Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, added that the impact of moving to 12 monthly instalments was being looked at and a 10% increase had been found in people moving to 12 instalments this year compared to last year. This did have an impact on collection rates and for Breckland Council for example, moving into the final months, equated to about £200,000 that ARP would be unable to collect until later in the year.

The other matter that the Head of ARP mentioned was about encouraging people to pay when their properties had not yet been banded. These cases were being monitored, and people were being encouraged to pay as well as looking at ways of prompting those who had not paid after a few months by e-mail or text, just to encourage them to start making payments.

The Chairman took the point very seriously about the impact on collection rates and felt that the targets should be looked at again and suggested the actuality should be reported rather than suddenly finding that a bundle of cash was coming in at the end of the year.

The Head of ARP agreed that more could be done as the targets had been set to what had been collected last year and if the move to 12 monthly instalments did increase by 10% year on year, this needed to be factored in.

The report was otherwise noted.

28/25 ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2025-26 (STANDING ITEM)

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

The report provided Members with information on the forecast full year financial performance against budget for the ARP.

The forecast at this stage showed just over a 1% above budget spend, which equated to £143,000. The main areas for the above budget spend was the pay award that had impacted the budget due to it being much higher than had been budgeted for. However, ARP was offsetting that where they could through vacancy savings, which was mitigating that overspend to a large extent. The other area was the postage costs, but the aim was to reduce those costs over the year via e-Billing.

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No questions were asked, and the report and appendix were noted.

29/25 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

Theresa Mann, the Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP), presented the report and summarised some of the key points.

Migration continued to Universal Credit with the DWP increasing the numbers of migration notices being issued each month whilst continuing to provide additional support to vulnerable customers to help them to claim Universal Credit as well as looking at how they could support customers who might need help beyond that, such as those with no fixed abode.

In the spending review, the government announced a new Crisis Resilience Fund was going to be launched, and this was going to incorporate the current Household Support fund and also discretionary housing payments. The aim of the fund was to provide longer term funding, which would enable local authorities to take a more preventative approach and plan more effectively. To help support communities, ARP were represented on the working group, which was meeting regularly to help shape the fund and produce a policy document.

As part of its plans for welfare reform, the government previously announced major changes to disability benefits, one of which was personal independence payments (PIP); however, a recent revision to the plans meant the changes would only apply to new claims from November 2026, and all existing PIP recipients would remain on the current system.

The other change announced eligibility for the winter fuel payments, which meant that from winter 2025/26 pensioners with a taxable income under £35,000 would receive it rather than just pensioners in receipt of pension credit.

Councillor Hind asked when the Crisis Resilience Fund would be rolled out.

Members were informed that it would be from April 26, and the amount of funding should be known at some point during the autumn/winter this year.

The report was otherwise noted.

30/25 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

The Chairman mentioned the Local Government Review as he was aware that the Head of ARP and her Team were busily working hard behind the scenes, positioning themselves as an organisation to move smoothly and without any interruption into some form of unitary authority representation.

He then asked the Head of ARP what was being planned and how she and her Team was going about it.

Members were informed that ARP was taking part in many working groups across each of the partnerships counties of which there were three providing lots of information to include in all proposals.

Also, behind the scenes ARP was starting to look at how its structure and how the governance of the partnership would fit into the potential outcomes of

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the LGR making sure that it was set up to take on whatever opportunities that arose. In-depth conversations were being had with the software supplier to make sure that they were prepared for all the changes ahead, including boundary changes, system migrations etc as well as making sure that performance was at its best to ensure that ARP was in the best possible position. Work was underway to prioritise and fast-track several of the partnership's 50+ projects, so everything was in place ready for the unitaries and what that meant for ARP going forward.

Councillor Langdon-Morris asked the Head of ARP if it would be possible to have a chat with her after this meeting as LGR was moving quite quickly and East Suffolk District Council had already produced a draught case for change under a three unitary position.

The Head of ARP said she would be more than happy to set a meeting up with Councillor Langdon-Morris. She then reminded Members that the next informal meeting in November had been extended so that all in attendance would have plenty of time to discuss LGR further.

The Chairman felt it was important to remember that ARP was currently a mixture of district authorities, and any successor authority would be working alongside ARP. He felt that there was no reason whatsoever to suspect that as everyone moved into the next phase, even more could be done to support residents and businesses alike.

Councillor French pointed out that Fenland District Council did not have to submit their proposal until November 2025. Referring to an earlier conversation, she mentioned the prosecutions that were going through the court process and asked if each authority could be notified on any successful ones as they needed to be publicised.

The Principal Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery Manager (ARP) explained that the Communications Team at whichever authority were informed of any successful prosecution.

Adding to the Chairman's earlier comments, in terms of the LGR, the Head of ARP stated that she was confident that with the experience and knowledge the partnership had it could accommodate any eventuality that came out of the proposals.

31/25 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on 9 December 2025 at 10am in Room 102, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford were noted.

The future meeting dates included on the agenda were noted.

The meeting closed at 10.30 am

CHAIRMAN