

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 December 2025 at 10.30 am in
Room 102, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford. IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Cllr Philip Cowen (Chairman)	Cllr Diane Hind
Cllr Keith Horgan (Vice-Chairman)	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)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer (BDC)

32/25 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 September were agreed as a correct record.

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33/25 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor Jan French.

34/25 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

35/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

36/25 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Katey Mills, the Principal Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery Manager (ARP), presented the September 2025 Performance Report that detailed the performance for each partner authority to the end of quarter 2. The overall performance was summarised before moving onto specific service area updates.

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As requested at the previous Joint Committee, a guide had been added for the keys and abbreviations used at the end of the document which she hoped Members would find helpful.

Business rates collection remained above target for all 5 partners.

Council Tax collection was either above or within target for 4 partners, with East Suffolk collection being under target.

The number of electronic forms received continued to increase with a 67% increase seen, when compared to quarter 2 of 2024/2025.

The Fraud and Compliance targets had been increased as previously agreed to £4.5m. Quarter 2 performance was now 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 Team have had a strong start to the year with over £2.8m in debt collected to the end of quarter 2, a similar performance to 2024/2025. Over £808k of fees had been collected at the end of quarter 2, which again was similar to the performance seen in 2024/2025 and an increase of 30% when compared to the same period of 2023/2024.

The Team continued to take proactive steps to engage with customers as early in the enforcement process as possible. They had been shortlisted as finalists in the 2025 IRRV awards for most improved team of the year. Not included in this report but worth mentioning, October had seen the Team collect the highest amount of debt since the Teams inception in 2015 of £650k which was an increase of £90k on their previous record.

Fraud and Compliance

The Fraud Team had identified fraud and error to the value of nearly £2.9m by the end of the second quarter. One successful prosecution had also been concluded with four official cautions administered as an alternative to prosecution action. Eight cases were currently working through the court system and 52 live investigations were ongoing.

The Team was close to implementing civil penalties and finalising correspondence and process content and continued to work well with partners and onboarding for Maldon had been completed.

Further recovery

The Further Recovery Team collected over £958k in debt in the most difficult Council Tax and Business Rates cases.

Their performance in quarter 2 was below their 2024/2025 performance but this was due to more effective triaging within the Business Rates Team and outstanding debt being collected at an earlier stage of the recovery cycle.

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 2, Council Tax collection for 4 of the 5 local authorities was within the target within the 1% tolerance zone for all local authorities. East Suffolk's collection was under the target.

Investigations continued on what could be impacting on collection, such as the increase in customers moving to 12 instalments, and the delays in new properties being brought into tax by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). This was being closely monitored, and it was noted that other councils in the local area had reported a similar picture with their collection rates.

Work levels remained high in the Billing Team, and resources and workloads were being closely monitored to ensure efficiency.

Work on automation continued, with particular focus on working with ARP's software supplier to improve change of address and refund automation results.

Benefits

At the end of quarter 2 year to date processing times for Council Tax Support were within the target for East Suffolk, Fenland and West Suffolk, but were very slightly over target for Breckland and East Cambridgeshire.

Year to date days to process Housing Benefit claims were not within the target at the end of quarter 2 for all local authorities.

As the housing benefit caseload continued to reduce with the ongoing migration to Universal Credit the cases retained were more complex and time consuming, such as temporary and supported accommodation.

Moving through quarter 3, a focus on work monitoring and resource allocation continued to try and improve performance in the Team and improvements were already being seen as a result.

The Communities Team initiative continued to expand, with referrals being made from many Teams across ARP to the local authority Communities Team to provide vulnerable customers with holistic support.

Business Rates

At the end of quarter 2 business rates collection was above the target for all local authorities.

The Team continued to have a keen focus on dealing with arrears, with recovery cycles being maintained and write offs being processed in a timely manner.

A project had been successfully rolled out to issue soft email reminders ahead of paper reminders, which had resulted in increased engagement and a reduction in postage.

Work continued to prepare for the upcoming business rates changes taking

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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 Systems Team successfully tested and installed MRI upgrades, which included important changes needed to complete the CTB1 Government returns. 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 ongoing preparation for the upcoming business rates changes.

Better Customer Experience Programme

Around 103,000 online forms had been received at the end of Quarter 2, which was twice as much as this time last year. The Enforcement Team was exploring how payment links could be generated in texts or emails sent to customers, to enhance the customer experience by improving the payment methods available.

The planned programme of events to continue to increase the numbers of customers signed up to paperless billing continued.

A trial of a customer survey using multimedia messaging had been launched to obtain feedback on our forms and the results confirmed that the customers contacted were satisfied with the forms and the service they had received.

Councillor Hind mentioned a concern that she had raised about a year ago in terms of the total of business rates arrears but had not seen any such information included in the report.

The Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP) explained that the amount of arrears and how that was being reduced had been shown in a briefing note to East Suffolk DC and this would be shared with all partners.

Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, pointed out that the total amount of debt by year would also be shown.

Councillor Hind stated that when this had previously been discussed she had asked how ARP could stop these arrears from increasing.

Members were informed that a presentation would be provided.

The Chairman, Councillor Cowen, stated that ARP would be facing a significant change in terms of Business Rates in 2026 and it was likely that more business failures would be seen which was a concern. He asked if Officers were confident that they had the right resource and the right ability going forward to deal with these changes.

The Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP) advised that ARP had been preparing this for a long time and had been recruiting staff to manage these changes and felt that ARP was in a good position. All information received thus far was being analysed but not all government guidance had been issued as yet. She was pleased to announce however, that there would be a new relief scheme that should mitigate some of those

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risks for the sector.	
The Performance Report was otherwise noted.	
37/25 <u>WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)</u>	
The Principal Billing, Benefits & Business Rates Manager (ARP), presented the report and summarised the key points.	
Firstly, an update on Universal Credit (UC) migration which was nearing completion with all migration notices having been issued by the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP).	
Work continued on the modernisation of the delivery of Housing Benefit and Pension Credit. This had moved from discovery work to an inception phase, with outcomes expected by October 2026.	
Finally, an update on the Crisis Resilience Fund. This was the bringing together of the Household Support fund and Discretionary Housing Payments, with the aim being to provide longer term funding to enable local authorities to best support their communities.	
ARP had been represented on the Working Group to help shape the fund, and the DWP had taken on board local authorities' comments, by recently announcing that it was going to continue to provide Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) funding directly to local authorities until 2028.	
It was noted that since this report had been published, the pensioner triple lock had been confirmed in the budget at 4.8%, and more detail would be added in terms of the budget announcement at the next meeting.	
Members praised the Team for moving customers to Universal Credit.	
Councillor Langdon Morris raised a question about the remaining 5% of cases that had not yet claimed UC.	
Members were informed that these specific cases were more complex and challenging and difficult to deal with, but support was being provided to address these.	
The report was otherwise noted.	
38/25 <u>ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2025-26 (STANDING ITEM)</u>	
Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC), presented the report that included a recommendation to help with the final accounts for each authority.	
The latest forecast indicated a small projected overspend of just over 16k (0.1%) across the ARP for the financial year. Further detail, including a breakdown of variances, had been provided at Appendix A.	
The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Horgan, noted the vacancies not being filled.	
The Head of ARP stated that the high staff turnover was partly due to internal	

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secondments. Both East Suffolk and West Suffolk were experiencing similar high vacancy rates, but a process was in place to closely monitor these vacancies and review required resources. Members were informed that a group of council tax billing officers were scheduled to be recruited in January 2026.

The Vice-Chairman felt that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) could be a factor and could be having an unsettling effect on staff but was pleased that it was being monitored.

The Head of ARP was pleased to inform Members that the latest recruitment drive had attracted 198 applicants.

Councillor Hind felt that the final outturn was not that bad and was quite small.

The Chairman felt that this was a well-managed budget.

The recommendations were proposed and seconded, and it was:

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the report and appendix be noted, and
- 2) the final full year variance at 31 March 2026 be shared between the partner authorities in the approved shares.

39/25 ARP BUDGET 2026-27

The Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer presented the ARP budget for 2026-27.

Each year, a joint budget was prepared for the ARP, covering the costs and income associated with the delivery of Council Tax, Housing Benefits, Non-Domestic Rates, Fraud and Enforcement services across the five partner authorities.

Attention was drawn to section 1.6 of the report in terms of efficiency targets for 2026/27.

This budget did not include a formal efficiency target for 2026-27, marking the first time in several years that such a target had not been set. Nevertheless, the partnership remained committed to identifying and delivering efficiencies wherever possible during the year. The partial absorption of recent postal cost increases already represented an efficiency saving in practice. Over the coming year, the ARP's primary focus would be on maintaining and enhancing service performance in preparation for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Horgan, felt that the report did not explain why the efficiency target had not been included.

Members were informed that such a target had always been set in previous years but due the fact that it had always been achieved and as many changes were being made and demand had peaked, service levels would drop if a target had been included.

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The Head of ARP explained that with LGR on the horizon, ARP did not want to start making resource savings and reducing the compliment. The idea was to be in a good position when LGR did happen. Many savings that were made were hidden within the budget such as postal costs which had not been included in the forecast as many would be moved to email.

The Vice-Chairman questioned the previous method of measuring performance, doing the same at a lower cost, and suggested that increased activity, doing more, could be added as an efficiency gain.

In response, it was confirmed that this approach was already in place and any resulting efficiencies would be officially reported at the end of the year.

There was some discussion about the benefits of AI and if this had been considered.

Members were informed that although not currently used, AI was being considered even though ARP was ahead of the game in terms of automation.

Tanya Sturman, Head of Service – Customer & Digital (West Suffolk DC), stated that there was potential in using AI but was dependent on the software supplier.

Councillor Hind felt that AI had its place, but it could not replace human understanding. She also believed that ARP was constantly looking for efficiencies particularly with LGR on the horizon.

The Chairman felt that one of the ways to deliver efficiencies was to gain a business stream and mentioned Maldon DC as an example.

Following a vote which was unanimous, it was:

RESOLVED that the ARP budget at Appendix A for 2026-27 be approved.

40/25 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE SERVICE PLAN AND RISK REGISTER REPORT

The Head of ARP provided Members with a detailed overview of the ARP Joint Committee Service Plan and Risk Register Report.

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 reviewed every 6 months.

A Service Delivery Plan for 2025-26 had been agreed in December 2024 and this report provided an update on progress in respect of performance, workloads, audit and the partnership's five strategic priorities - Customers, Relationships, Colleagues, Digital and Sustainability (see Appendix C attached).

A new Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register for 2026-27 had been drafted to come into effect April 2026 (see Appendix B attached).

In December 2023, Members reviewed the strategic direction of the ARP, deciding to maintain objectives whilst implementing a four-year Business

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Plan, subsequently effective from April 2024. The annual Service Plan complements the Business Plan which runs until 2028.

The Head of ARP then summarised the key highlights from the 2025-26 Service Plan contained within Appendix C, which included:

- **Benefit processing times**
- **Audit and GTPR**
- **Customers** – ARP's new Contact-us Form was now in its second year and as at the end of Quarter 2, 72% of customers were now using the form and 28% via email
- **Relationships** – Maldon Council had been welcomed on board as a new Fraud and Enforcement Partner.
- **Colleagues** - Phil Butler, the new Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Support), would be joining ARP on 15 December 2025. One apprentice was due to complete their qualification in March 2026, and a further 11 were studying for apprenticeships linked to the professional IRRV or management qualifications and were exploring other options for apprenticeships across all teams. Currently 47 employees held or were studying for IRRV qualifications. The new ARP Joint Management Development Programme launched in the summer 2025 led by the Senior Management Team had proved very successful. The first ARP staff awards were planned to be held in January 2026, and the annual Recognition and Celebration event would be held next week.
- **Digital** – eBilling success was highlighted.

The new proposed 2026-27 Service Plan and Risk Register was then highlighted (section 15 of the report) followed by sections 16 and 17 where the key actions had been listed including the risks which would be closely monitored and reported.

The recommendations were then read aloud.

Councillor Hind had noted under Section 6 of the report on the graph under Billing - Processes outstanding, that there had been a big reduction in September 2024/25 but there was no such reduction in the current year and asked for an explanation.

The Head of ARP explained that this was being closely monitored. Workloads peaked following annual billing, but new initiatives were being planned in the new year to try and get everything up to date prior to annual billing. It was noted that since the report had been published a decline was already being seen.

Referring to Council Tax payments, the Vice-Chairman, Councillor Horgan, asked if many people had now chosen to pay in 12-month instalments rather than 10 and if this had caused any cash flow problems.

Members were informed that the move to 12-month instalments had increased by 10% this year and there had been an impact to cash flow which was being closely monitored as well as looking to re-profile performance targets.

Councillor Langdon-Morris drew attention to the bottom of section 9 in terms of the feedback survey linked to on-line forms that had been carried out in the

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summer. Although he felt that this was a very good idea, he raised concerns about the customers, particularly the elderly, who did not have a computer and wondered whether the survey could be carried out over the phone and if such information could still be captured within the ARP systems.

The Head of ARP stated that the survey was only sent to those people who had already completed the on-line form but would look at doing some surveys over the phone. She pointed out that it had been found from the feedback that the forms had not been the easiest to use so the focus would be to make these more user friendly.

The Head of Service – Customer & Digital (East Suffolk DC) informed Members that it took a while for customers to complete the online form but at least all information was being captured rather than just sending an email. It was noted that the form had actually improved the service for customers.

In response to a question, it was noted that all on-line forms were clearly posted on the website.

The Vice-Chairman questioned whether the FAQ links directed people to the correct forms and were signposted automatically.

The Head of ARP then explained how the system worked.

The Chairman asked if there was any information on the website stating why they were being asked to complete the form.

The Head of ARP stated that the wording was very clear but would be reviewed.

On another matter, Councillor Langdon-Morris thanked Theresa Mann the Principal Billing, Benefits and Business Rates Manager (ARP) and Katey Mills, the Principal Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery Manager (ARP) for their presentation they provided recently and hoped that they could repeat it in the future.

The recommendations were proposed and seconded and it was:

RESOLVED that:

- the progress in respect of the December 2024 Service Delivery Plan at Appendix A and detailed in Appendix C be noted; and
- the revised December 2025 Service Delivery Plan and risk register at Appendix B for 2026-27 be approved.

41/25 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

The Chairman was aware that the government had changed the goalposts on Devolution that could have an impact on some of the work that ARP was doing and felt that this should be kept under careful observation.

42/25 NEXT MEETING

It was agreed that the next meeting on Tuesday, 17 March 2025 at 10am would be held in person and not via Teams in Room 102, Breckland House,

St Nicholas Street, Thetford. IP24 1BT.

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The meeting closed at 11.50 am

CHAIRMAN