

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

Agenda Item 13

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES & BENEFITS JOINT COMMITTEE

**Held on Tuesday, 17 March 2026 at 10.00 am in the
Room 102, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford. IP24 1BT**

PRESENT

Cllr Philip Cowen (Chairman)	Cllr Vince Langdon-Morris
Cllr Keith Horgan (Vice-Chairman)	Cllr Jan French
Cllr Diane Hind	

In Attendance

Lorraine King	- Head of ARP
Theresa Mann	- Head of Billing, Benefits and Business Rates (ARP)
Katey Mills	- Head of Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery (ARP)
Phil Butler	- Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Support) (ARP)
Anna Goodall	- Assistant Director (Fenland DC)
Tanya Sturman	- Head of Service - Customer and Digital (West Suffolk DC)
Sally Bonnett	- Director – Community (East Cambs DC)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer (BDC)

1/26 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

2/26 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from the following officers:

- Alison Chubbock, Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC)
- Lorraine Rogers, Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer (East Suffolk DC)
- Jude Antony, Principal Accountant & Deputy S151 Officer (East Cambs DC)

Sally Bonnett, Director of Community (East Cambs DC), was in attendance as Jude Antony's substitute.

3/26 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

4/26 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

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5/26 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Phil Butler, the Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Support) (ARP), presented the Performance Report for 25/26 Quarter 3

The report provided a comprehensive overview of activity and performance across the partnership up to 31 December 2025.

Members attention was drawn to page 14 of the agenda pack, that highlighted the combined position for all partner councils.

Overall collection performance across all partners continued to be strong.

- Business Rates collection was ahead of target across all partners, with Q3 actuals at £243.4m against a £238.8m target.
- Council Tax collection for Q3 was £512.1m, just below the Q3 target of £514.4m but was still performing within the expected 1% tolerance.
- Electronic forms usage continued to rise significantly, now at 151,024 year to date, almost the whole of last year's total.
- Fraud and Compliance targets had been increased earlier in the year to £4.5m, and Q3 performance indicated that the Team remained on track to meet this enhanced target by year-end.

Pages 15 to 38 of the agenda pack provided the detailed performance information for each individual partner council across Business Rates, Council Tax, Local Council Tax Reduction, Housing Benefit, and Fraud & Compliance, providing a full breakdown of progress against targets up to 31 December 2025.

The Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Support) (ARP): together with Theresa Mann, Head of Billing, Benefits & Business Rates (ARP) and Katey Mills, Head of Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery (ARP) then turned to the Service updates on pages 39 to 42 of the agenda pack that summarised key themes and issues as of 31 December 2025.

Enforcement

The Head of Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery (ARP), reported that ARP enforcement continued to perform well with over £4.58m in debt collected to the end of quarter 3, slightly higher performance than 2024/2025. Over £1.168m in fees had been collected at the end of quarter 3, which was similar to the performance seen in 2024/2025 - an increase of 25% when compared to the same period of 2023/2024.

The Team prioritised early customer engagement within the enforcement process. This proactive approach was helped by attending a regional roundtable hosted by the Enforcement Conduct Board, alongside representatives from the debt advice sector. This event proved invaluable, allowing ARP to showcase its methods while gaining deeper insights into the debt advice sector.

Fraud and Compliance

The Fraud Team identified fraud and error to the value of over £3.8m by the end of the third quarter. Four successful prosecutions had also been

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concluded with eight other sanctions administered as an alternative to prosecution action. Six cases were currently working through the court system, and 52 live investigations were ongoing.

The Team was close to implementing civil penalties and were finalising preventative communications together with partner Communication teams and collaboration with all external partners remained strong.

Further recovery

The Further Recovery Team collected over £1.5m in debt in the most difficult Council Tax and Business Rates cases.

Their performance in quarter 3 was below their 2024/2025 performance. 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.

Council Tax

The Head of Billing, Benefits & Business Rates (ARP) then reported that Council tax collection at the end of Quarter 3 for 4 of the local authorities in the partnership was either within the target or the tolerance zone, with East Suffolk being under the target.

The Team continued to monitor impacting factors closely, such as the move to 12 instalments, the potential impact of Valuation Office Agency (VOA) delays and introduction of council tax premiums.

Work volumes remained high, and resource allocation continued to be monitored, and processes reviewed to ensure that the Team was as efficient as possible. This included continued focus on automating processes, and ensuring customers used the 'Contact Us' form where possible, as this was automatically indexed against the customer's account.

The continued focus on paperless billing also continued with messaging campaigns and a programme of events throughout the year to increase take up.

Benefits

Quarterly processing times for Council Tax reduction claims were within the target for all local authorities at the end of Quarter 3, and although quarterly processing times for housing benefit were just over the tolerance of the target at the end of Quarter 3, there had been an improvement in performance from the previous quarter, and this was set to continue.

As previously discussed in the Council Tax update, there was a keen focus across the Billing and Benefit Team on improving performance through workload and resource monitoring.

There was also a continued focus on automation, and the Team had been able to automate 97% of Universal Credit notifications received from the DWP. This helped to manage the large number of notices received. The Team also continued to focus on supporting most vulnerable customers, with the partnership's Communities Team initiative, which referred vulnerable customers to the local authority for holistic support.

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ARP also continued to support its partners with their work using data to identify and support vulnerable customers, with work on the LIFT, SODA and Xantura projects.

Business Rates

Business rates collection remained above target for all local authorities at the end of Quarter 3 and work continued on making sure arrears and credits were dealt with in a timely manner.

Work was ongoing to prepare for the changes to business rates that were effective from 1 April 2026, with additional resource in place within the Team and a focus on getting the work as up to date as possible.

ARP Systems & Digital Update

Turning to Systems and Digital, the Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Support) reported that Quarter 3 had been a particularly busy and productive period for the Team.

During this quarter the Team successfully completed testing for the MRI upgrades and scheduled the live installations for both Council Tax and Business Rates. These upgrades were essential to support the CTB1 and NNDR1 Government returns, and to ensure all the system changes required for Annual Billing and the Business Rates Reform were fully in place.

Moving into Quarter 4, the focus now shifted to Annual Billing for 2026–27. The Team continued to work collaboratively across the partnership on the paperless billing campaign. Since April 2024, up to the end of Q3, 54,441 Council Tax e-billing sign-ups and 8,977 for Business Rates had been achieved. Bills were sent directly as PDF attachments, which had noticeably reduced customer contact compared to the previous portal-login method.

Social media activity continued and working through a planned programme of initiatives to increase take-up further. The focus in Quarter 4 was the e-billing *opt-out* campaign.

The Systems Admin and Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) Teams continued to support a wide range of ongoing partnership projects — including arrangement manager, refund automation, and moves automation.

In Quarter 3, the Team completed all the systems and digital work needed for the Single Person Discount review digitalisation, and the implementation of fraud services for Maldon District Council.

Finally, the Team was working very closely with the Business Rates service on the April 2026 revaluation and multiplier changes. This work began in Quarter 3 and would continue into Quarter 4, ensuring everything was ready for Annual Billing 2026–27.

Better Customer Experience Programme

Quarter 3 continued to show strong progress, with just over 151,000 online forms received so far this year, including 'Contact Us' forms which was a 43% increase on the same point last year, and close to the total for the whole of 2024–25.

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Around 70% of 'Contact Us' forms were now automatically indexed, which improved efficiency and reduced manual handling due to the 'Contact Us' form linking directly into the partnership's online forms, that helped encourage customers to self-serve and supported automation across the process.

Our initiative using payment links sent by text or email continues, working with an external partner. These links feed straight into online banking apps, making it easier for customers to pay. The Enforcement Team had continued to explore and expand this capability across Quarter 3 and this would continue into Quarter 4.

External providers were still being used to drive paperless e-billing take-up, Quarter 3 included further campaigns. The 'Contact Finder' function had been completed, which obtained email addresses available in the public domain. This had resulted in just over 3,000 additional sign-ups. As a result, by the end of Quarter 3, 26% of Council Tax customers and 35% of Business Rates customers were now signed up to e-billing.

The Team had also been working with external providers to scope three new projects:

Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) across Cambridgeshire, Propensity to Pay engagement, and work on reducing Historic Credits. These would progress further in Quarter 4.

Finally, the on-line forms customer survey completed in Quarter 2, and there would be further focus in Quarter 4 as part of the twice-yearly cycle.

It was noted that a key to abbreviations had been attached as previously requested by Members.

Councillor Hind questioned why tenancy fraud remained below target. She also enquired why 70% of forms were still being manually indexed despite being available online, and whether the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) scheme would be expanded to other counties.

In terms of tenancy fraud, the Head of Fraud, Enforcement & Recovery advised that there were a number of investigations still on-going and the results of two of these investigations would be seen in 2026/27.

As far as the 70% of auto indexing was concerned, Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, explained that all the details from the on-line form were taken to identify the live account following which the process would start automatically - the other 30% might possibly require a little further intervention. LIFT was a Suffolk wide project that was up and running, the results of which were already being seen. Breckland Council was exploring other options through a company called Xantura.

Councillor French referred to the successful prosecutions and in a response to a question, it was confirmed that one was in the Fenland district.

The Chairman, Councillor Cowen, noted that while e-billing was discussed at the Innovation Centre meetings, he acknowledged that many residents still preferred paper copies and enquired if a downloadable PDF option would be available.

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In response, the Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Support), assured Members that PDF documents could be downloaded but a paper copy can still be issued if requested.

The Performance report was otherwise noted.

6/26 ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2025-26 (STANDING ITEM)

In the absence of Alison Chubbock, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC), Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, presented the report.

The national pay award, confirmed in July, was higher than the indicative forecasts. Whilst this had resulted in costs exceeding the original budget, these had been more than offset by vacancy savings within the establishment. A recruitment exercise had taken place at the end of January 2026 to fill the majority of vacancies. A second recruitment exercise would take place in March.

The overspend within supplies and services was partly attributable to an increase in hired services costs relating to automated messaging and the wider use of email across all service areas. These additional costs had resulted in significant savings in postage volumes, enabling ARP to mitigate the significant increases in postal costs seen this year leading to cost avoidance in this area. Land Registry fees had also increased as well as enforcement costs for Maldon DC; these had not been factored into the budget.

Members were informed that an amount of £60k had been set aside into the ARP Reserve to fund a 12-month fixed term Systems Support Manager (Projects) role. This role would provide a dedicated resource to manage, oversee and co-ordinate cross cutting technical projects with the partnership. The underspend shown was after this funding had been set aside.

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

7/26 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)

The Head of Billing, Benefits & Business Rates, presented the Welfare Reform report, a quarterly report for Members to note.

The managed migration to Universal Credit (UC) was set to conclude by the end of March and the DWP was working with local authorities to identify and support claimants who had not migrated to UC.

An update to the Crisis and Resilience Fund, which was aimed at supporting low-income households and building financial resilience and commenced on 1 April and would replace Discretionary Housing Payments with a Housing Payment element. There would be a phased transition to ensure stability in funding for Local Authorities over the next 2 years.

The three main outcomes being worked towards were:

- Provision and access to effective crisis support
- Improving individuals and local communities' financial resilience
- Bolstering community level support

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ARP would be working closely with the county councils to provide linked up support for residents as well as working with ARP's software supplier MRI on solutions for delivery of the Crisis and Resilience Fund.

Other updates included:

- LHA rates for 2026-27 would be frozen again at 2024-25 levels
- Pensioner triple lock was in place, and this year the state pension would increase by 4.8%.

Regarding planned future reforms – the government remained committed to bring together the administration of Housing Benefit and Pension Credit but had confirmed that it recognised the need for a stable and measured approach to implementation.

Finally, following the Supported Housing Act that came into effect in August 2023, the DWP proposed to link entitlement for housing benefit for supported housing to the new licensing regime and had carried out a consultation on how care, support and supervision could be defined. Further analysis of the consultation was being carried out and would be published as part of the next steps.

ARP was collaborating with Housing Teams in Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire to work together on topics related to the Supported Housing Act.

It was noted that in a recent announcement the Government would be providing £53m to help vulnerable households in rural communities to cope with rising heating costs. This would be distributed by local authorities as part of the new Crisis Resilience Fund (CRF), but no further detail on this had been received as yet but Members would be kept updated on this matter.

Councillor Langdon-Morris knew of heating oil being stolen in his area.

Members were informed that while all households received heating payments last year, future support would be means-tested via the CRF; additionally, those affected by heating oil theft should seek reimbursement through their household insurance.

The increase in cost in heating oil and the delay in companies delivering it were discussed.

The Chairman asked to be kept informed on when and how this scheme was going to be managed.

The report was otherwise noted.

8/26 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor Horgan, updated the Committee on ongoing discussions regarding Council Tax support for the terminally ill which had been debated at a previous pre-meeting. He was aware of significant member interest and confirmed he was working with the S151 Officer to produce a briefing paper for the administration. Whilst existing schemes varied between councils, he suggested that introducing the SR1 form could simplify the

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process without significantly impacting tax collection. Although local data on terminal illness was difficult to quantify, Councillor Horgan welcomed Members to share these findings with their respective councils and come back to this Committee once conclusions had been reached.

Councillor Hind inquired whether ARP had considered including Alzheimer's in the 'terminal illness' definition, as she was aware that other authorities already offered significant discounts for this.

The Vice-Chairman clarified that eligibility was dependent on the stage of dementia; whilst an SR1 form from a medical professional would streamline the process, however, the specific evidence required remained unclear. He pointed out that if many residents already received these benefits, the financial impact on councils could be minimal.

Councillor Langdon-Morris suggested using PIP data to model the number of residents affected by cancer.

Lorraine King, the Head of ARP, emphasised that this initiative sat outside the means-tested Council Tax Support scheme. She supported a proactive, conversation-led approach through the Communities Team to identify vulnerable customers, rather than strictly requiring GP proof, to align with councils already successful routes.

The Vice-Chairman confirmed that Manchester City Council's website already provided the necessary forms. However, as this project was still in its early stages and there was nothing to implement at this point, he asked for a discussion paper to be produced for future feedback.

In regard to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), the Chairman noted that due to Parliament's Easter recess and the elections in May, any updates not received by 25 March were likely not to arrive until after 7 May. Despite this uncertainty, he felt that ARP was positioned to expand its business across any new unitary structures.

The Head of ARP added that ARP had robust workstreams and resource plans in place to future-proof the organisation and maintain 'business as usual' regardless of the LGR outcome.

9/26 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 9 June at 10.30am in Room 102, Breckland House, St Nicholas Steet, Thetford, were noted.

It was further noted that there would be 30-minute Joint Committee Members discussion at 9.30am followed by a pre-brief at 10am.

10/26 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

11/26 PARTNERSHIP WORKING THROUGH SECTION 113 AGREEMENT

Katey Mills, Head of Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery, provided Members with a brief but detailed overview of the report.

The three options were highlighted of which option 3 was the preferred recommendation.

If approved, the agreement would be overseen by legal and would require formal approval from each ARP partner and would also include GDPR and system access information.

The Vice-Chairman inquired about the option to extend current contracts. It was confirmed that this would be included. It was noted that staff on fixed-term contracts exceeding two years would transition to permanent status.

Councillor Langdon-Morris asked about office capacity. It was explained that high levels of homeworking had left plenty of room for new staff across multiple offices.

A question was asked about the timeline. In response Members were informed that ARP had originally been approached in 2024 then did not hear anything for about a year and then last November an email was received stating that they wanted to proceed, acknowledging the process had been rushed as the standard lead-in period was normally six months and ideally should have been discussed at the December meeting.

Councillor Langdon-Morris asked if LGR would take a similar stance.

The Head of Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery explained that while LGR was similar, ARP remained a highly scalable model.

Councillor Hind raised concerns regarding recruitment timelines if a decision was reached by 25 March. She had noted that LGR roles were typically fixed term, whereas roles under a Section 113 Agreement were not and might not attract suitable staff.

The Head of ARP added that whilst roles often started as fixed term, they frequently became permanent for those who decided to remain.

The Head of Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery felt that ARP would attract staff as there were more opportunities for future progression.

The Chairman highlighted that the new authority would be formally constituted in May 2028, presenting significant opportunities for staff.

Councillor French wished the Team luck, noting Fenland's inclusion in LGR "tranche 2."

The Head of ARP pointed out that the Single Person Discount (SPD) review was a "plug and play" model with high growth potential and plenty of opportunities for staff in that area of work.

The Chairman felt that did not matter where ARP staff were located and was something that ought to continue to pursue as it builds resilience and becomes more cost effective for the partners.

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The Head of Fraud, Enforcement and Recovery announced that she had volunteered to attend a seminar for Tel Solutions.

Following a unanimous vote, it was:

RESOLVED that the recommendations as listed in the report be approved.

The meeting closed at 11.05 am

CHAIRMAN