

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, 5 December 2023 at 9.30 am in the Seminar and Training Room, Keystone Innovation Centre, Croxton Road, Thetford, IP24 1JD

PRESENT

Cllr Paul Ashton (Chairman) Cllr James Lay
 Cllr Diane Hind (Vice-Chairman) Cllr David Connor (Substitute Member)
 Cllr Philip Cowen

In Attendance

Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD (Fenland)
Alison Chubbock	- Section 151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance
Lorraine King	- Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP)
Rachael Mann	- Director (Resources & Property) (West Suffolk)
Adrian Mills	- Head of ARP
Lorraine Rogers	- Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer (East Suffolk District Council)
Matthew Waite-Wright	- Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP)
Ian Smith	- Director, Finance (East Cambs)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

33/23 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

34/23 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor French. Councillor Connor was in attendance as her substitute.

35/23 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

36/23 DECLARATIONS

None declared.

37/23 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Matthew Waite-Wright, the Head of NNDR, Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) provided Members with a detailed overview of the Joint Committee Performance Report for September 2023.

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Business Rates and Council Tax collection for all partner authorities had exceeded the set target for the second quarter but were slightly behind the 2022/23 percentage rate for this time of the year and would be closely monitored.

Although the number of days to process Housing Benefits in Quarter 2 was above target for all partner authorities, the performance had been impacted by the energy schemes which had now closed.

Both the number of electronic forms received and the target for fraud & compliance were both on course, and the latter was well on the way of exceeding the target set.

Referring to the Housing Benefit target missed by all partner authorities, Lorraine King, the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) explained that there were several reasons that had impacted the housing benefit target for Quarter 2. A system bug had affected automation levels, but this had since been fixed by the software provider. The move to Universal Credit had increased the workload, temporary accommodation and supported accommodation was another area that had taken longer to process but since the publication of this report all were now back on track.

Members were informed that two focus days had taken place to concentrate on getting new Housing benefit claims more up to date to improve the processing times. The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) felt that Members may wish to discuss the Housing Benefit target for 2024/25. It was noted that DWP had been holding workshops nationally that ARP took part in and DWP had been extremely impressed with the Partnership's ways of working and had taken several good practices away with them.

In conclusion, the Head of NNDR, Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) was pleased to report that the Enforcement Team had collected over £2m in debt repayment and fees of over £622k. The preparations for the 2024/25 Council Tax bills were well underway, the Systems & Digital Team's recently introduced 'Contact us' form was working well, and Fraud & Compliance was going from strength to strength. Additionally, the work around automation in terms of Council Tax moves had reduced the number of reminders by 50%, and the new telephony system went live in October.

Councillor Cowen was very pleased with the report but in terms of fraud & compliance as it was doing so well, was it being publicised enough because if it was surely the amount collected would reduce, knowing that ARP had an excellent record of tracing these fraudulent cases and asked if the prosecution figures could be provided.

MW-W

The Head of NNDR, Recovery & Enforcement (ARP) explained that the amount of money was actually increasing as a great deal of fraud was being identified. Benefits fraud and Single Persons discounts were two completely separate areas, but he would be happy to provide the prosecution figures. It was noted that Single Persons discount was the biggest area of fraud.

Councillor Cowen asked how ARP could encourage people not to make fraudulent claims. Members were informed that a clear message was always included on the Council Tax bills but he would be happy to receive any further suggestions.

The Head of ARP, Adrian Mills explained how performance was reported and whether the communications and publicity was working well or not would be monitored accordingly.

The Chairman, Councillor Ashton, felt that Councils' press releases did not go far enough and felt that more money should be spent on a better publicity campaign. He asked if this could be considered, and such an approach be reported back in due course.

Councillor Cowen had noted that the move to Universal credit and claims for temporary accommodation were taking longer to process and asked if anything could be done or was being done to speed up the process. He also had concerns with the significant increase in temporary accommodation costs and felt that it could become a problem that could continually grow.

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) said that ARP was working very closely with the Housing Team and much more information was now being provided and was being made aware of new cases much quicker. She explained that claims for temporary accommodation took longer due to the person possibly moving 2 or 3 times a week. In response to Councillor Cowen's concern, Members were informed that temporary accommodation was a very difficult to control as most people who requested such accommodation were in transient, and the Team had numerous addresses and contact numbers to deal with.

The Head of ARP pointed out that there had been a significant rise in demand for temporary accommodation. He also pointed out that the workshops that the Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) had arranged with DWP had been featured in the Good Practice Guide.

The Vice-Chair, Councillor Hind, was aware that rental costs had increased dramatically, and people were moving around a great deal more into much cheaper accommodation.

Councillor Lay felt that the issue of temporary accommodation was an area that was going to grow particularly as more and more landlords were getting out of the rental market.

The Head of ARP agreed that it was an area that was demand led.

The Chairman felt that there could be some merit in partners sharing information on homelessness as all were being affected.

Rachael Mann, the Director of Resources & Property (West Suffolk), said that she would be happy to take this action away to establish if her housing colleagues could reach out. West Suffolk had acquired a number of properties over the years to enable housing benefit to be recovered, and she would be happy to share any information with the Partners.

Councillor Cowen (BDC) said that Breckland Council had done the same, acquired its own accommodation, but it was growing and there was nothing that could be done about it, all that could be done was react to it.

Sam Anthony, Head of HR & OD (Fenland DC), felt that a Housing Strategy Group should be set up to discuss these issues.

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<p>Councillor Lay reported that in East Cambs, he had a number of who had just been informed by their landlords that the properties were going to be put on the housing market so he would probably need some assistance on this matter.</p>	
<p>The Director of Resources & Property (West Suffolk) suggested that a Housing Task & Finish Group should be set up between all Partners.</p>	RM
<p>The Head of ARP agreed with the above suggestion and felt that an ARP cross functional Housing Task & Finish Group should be set up to share best practices.</p>	OIB
<p>The Chairman asked if it would be worth setting up a project group to delve into the data.</p>	
<p>The Director of Resources & Property (West Suffolk) said she would be happy to take this action away as West Suffolk had those skilled individuals to access such data and she would ask them to share such information across the Partnership.</p>	RM
<p>Subject to the actions listed above, the Joint Committee Performance Report was otherwise noted.</p>	
<p>38/23 <u>WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)</u></p>	
<p>The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) presented the report which was for Members to note.</p>	
<p>Under section 2.1.15, summary of the current position on the expansion of Universal Credit (UC), Members were informed that the move to UC in terms of Southeast Wales, Central Scotland and Southwest Scotland continued.</p>	
<p>The small-scale discovery phase that would provide more combinations of benefits into Manchester with Harrow and Northumberland was going very well.</p>	
<p>ARP continued to press for more information and timelines at our regular DWP & LGA liaison meetings and further updates on the ongoing roll out programme were awaited.</p>	
<p>Anyone in receipt of Housing Benefit would receive a migration notice during between April and June 2024. Further information was awaited.</p>	
<p>The report was otherwise noted.</p>	
<p>39/23 <u>ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)</u></p>	
<p>The Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC) presented the report.</p>	
<p>Members were informed that the forecast at this stage of the year showed an overspend against budget of £141k (1.3%) for the whole of ARP. The main reason for the overspend had been due to the recently agreed national pay award and the significant increase in Royal mail postage charges that came into effect in October 2023.</p>	

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 2024 be shared between the partner authorities in the approved shares.

40/23 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE PARTNERSHIP BUDGET 2024-25

The Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC) presented the report.

Members were informed that compared to the 2023-24 numbers this proposed budget had increased significantly by £931K (8.8%). The reasons behind this increase could be seen in the table at section 1.5 of the report.

It was noted that whilst salary costs had increased, staffing numbers had not and in terms of postage costs, Royal Mail intended to increase its prices again in 2024. As well as the efficiencies to mitigate the Royal Mail price increase, the budget included the remainder of the previously set efficiency target of £91k to be achieved.

Councillor Connor asked how much Royal Mail was going to put its prices up next year. Members were informed that costs were due to rise again by a similar amount.

The Head of ARP said that the Partnership would aim to offset the increase through automation as well as further initiatives in the pipeline to offset those costs.

Councillor Cowen (BDC) asked if the increase was a proportion of the total and what it represented. He also asked why ARP used Royal Mail as he felt that there could be cheaper options such as private mail companies that could be considered. In response to the first question, the Assistant Director of Finance & S151 Officer (BDC) advised that it represented £550k, and in response to the latter question, it was noted that there was no other option but to use Royal Mail.

The Head of ARP explained that ARP had a contract in place with a printing and mailing company and they used Royal Mail for the final delivery but believed that whoever was used, it did not have to be Royal Mail and could form part of the scope when the contract came to an end next year.

The Head of Benefits & Council Tax Billing (ARP) pointed out that ARP used economy post that saved 2p per letter.

Councillor Cowen felt that if Royal Mail was failing ARP should be concerned and if the most vulnerable people were not receiving important post, was there anyway to look at an alternative approach in getting mail to these individuals.

The Chairman acknowledged that procurement activity for printing and mailing would be looked at for next year.

The Head of ARP stated that the price would be based on volumes and as

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ARP was looking to reduce such mailing activity in terms of automation, this would affect the price of the contract.

The Vice-Chairman felt that procurement should be the final option, Norfolk was a large rural area and Royal Mail should take this into account and she was not sure how this could be monitored.

The Head of ARP assured Members that ARP did secure a competitive price in terms of the contract and would look to replicate this going forward.

On the issue of automation, the Chairman asked if it would be possible to report progress on these electronic measures.

Members were informed that every June and December a workshop on matters of interest was usually delivered and the Head of ARP said that he would be happy to include this topic.

The Chairman felt that this should be standing item on the agenda rather than a workshop.

As there were no further questions, the recommendation was proposed and seconded, and it was:

RESOLVED that the ARP budget at Appendix A of the report for 2024-25 be approved.

**OIB/
JB**

41/23 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE SERVICE PLAN AND RISK REGISTER REPORT

The Head of ARP provided Members with a detailed overview of the report.

Various sections of the report were highlighted in particular at section 2.0 of the report where the significant achievements in 2023 could be seen including the key part that ARP played in helping shape and design the guidance and processes in terms of the two fuel schemes. ARP was the first authority to make payments nationally and in total paid out almost £1.6m to help residents with rising fuel costs.

Under section 2.20, it was noted that, the late receipt of DLUHC New Burdens Administration funding was mainly due to the budget for the 2022-23 year ended in surplus; the funding was recompense for costs attributed to the delivery of the seven Business Rates reliefs, including the CARF scheme, and the Energy Rebate scheme.

Referring to section 2.3 of the report, the number of outstanding UCDS files had gradually increased since June as a system issue had been identified that prevented 13% of the more complex records from automating correctly. A fix had now been released which was currently being tested and it was anticipated that the volume of outstanding files would reduce to levels seen in the first quarter of this year when fully implemented.

Under Section 2.11, the Head of ARP explained that despite the increase in demand, through the expanding automation ARP had been able to reduce its complement this year. If not for the level of automation, ARP would have required additional resource to cope with increasing workloads, as the case at most other Councils at this time. Details could be seen in the tables on pages

57 and 58 of the agenda pack.

During the month of October, Benefit processes had been brought up to date; thereby, reducing the number of outstanding processes (see section 2.13 of the report).

In terms of cost pressures, there was a cost pressure on the budget for 2023/24 attributable to higher than anticipated pay awards for 2022 and this year, along with inflationary increases in supplier costs. An efficiency target had been set and ARP was working with its software supplier to implement further automation opportunities that would lead to future efficiencies.

DWP relaunched their 'Move to UC' programme in 2022 to migrate customers to Universal Credit. Following a successful pilot with five authorities a report was published with the outcomes, leading to improvements for the remainder of the move programme. In the Autumn budget in November 2022, it was announced that plans to continue to move across 2.5 million cases on to UC would continue but the move of a further 1 million ESA customers would be delayed until 2028. The plan to consider movement of Pensioners on to a Housing Element had also been delayed from 2025 to 2028-29.

The risk register continued to highlight the need to monitor the impact of the cost-of-living and inflationary pressures upon customers, service delivery and the budget as well as Universal Credit migration on customers and DWP subsidy, amongst others. ARP continued to influence changes in delivery through its representation on DWP steering groups. A further update would be provided in the New Year.

The recommendations were proposed and seconded, and it was:

RESOLVED that:

1. the progress in respect of the December 2022 Service Delivery Plan be noted, and
2. the 2023 Service Delivery Plan and risk register at Appendix B of the report be approved.

42/23 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

The Chairman advised that the current Head of ARP, Adrian Mills, would be retiring soon and therefore a new Head of ARP would need to be recruited. The Joint Committee had been tasked to determine questions and he asked Members if they would be able to provide some suitable questions that could be put to the candidate(s).

**JC
Mbrs**

43/23 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 5 March 2024 at 10am were noted. This meeting would be held via Teams.

**All to
Note**

The meeting closed at 10.35 am

CHAIRMAN

