

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

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

**Held on Tuesday, 22 June 2021 at 11.00 am in the
Carnegie Rooms, Cage Lane, Thetford. IP24 2EA**

PRESENT

Cllr Philip Cowen	Cllr Maurice Cook
Cllr David Ambrose-Smith	Cllr David Connor (Substitute Member)
Cllr Sarah Broughton	

In Attendance

Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Sam Anthony	- Head of HR & OD (Fenland)
Alison Chubbock	- Assistant Director Finance (Section 151 Officer)
Lorraine King	- Operations Manager (Benefits & Billing) ARP
Rachael Mann	- Assistant Director (Resources & Performance) (West Suffolk)
Brian Mew	- Chief Finance Officer & S151 Officer (East Suffolk)
Adrian Mills	- Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) ARP
Ian Smith	- Finance Manager & S151 Officer (East Cambs)
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

Chairman's Opening Remarks

The outgoing Chairman, Councillor Cowen thanked everyone within the ARP Partnership for dealing with all the challenges in what had been an incredibly difficult year, yet so much had still been achieved which he felt had been a great success.

14/21 CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR (AGENDA ITEM 1)

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

RESOLVED that Councillor David Ambrose-Smith (East Cambridgeshire DC) be appointed as Chairman for the ensuing year.

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

RESOLVED that Councillor Jan French (Fenland DC) be appointed as Vice-Chair for the ensuing year.

Councillor David Ambrose-Smith in the Chair.

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Action By**15/21 TREASURER (AGENDA ITEM 2)**

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.

16/21 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 3)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

17/21 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 4)

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Jan French. Cllr David Connor was in attendance as substitute.

18/21 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 5)

None.

19/21 DECLARATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 6)

None.

20/21 ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN AND RISK REGISTER (AGENDA ITEM 7)

Paul Corney, Head of ARP presented the Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register.

The pandemic had significantly impacted the services but was continuing to lessen and considerable progress had been made on the Service Delivery Plan.

An error on the Service Plan was highlighted, Members were informed that on the appendix under Maximising Taxbase NNDR, the last three boxes in that row should read as follows, and had been replaced:

Planning, external services such as analyse local and ARP	Data to be shared so that taxbase is maximised and relief to be reviewed regularly	A data matching exercise will take place to identify cases where SBRR is incorrectly claimed because there is more than one business in the Company. A timetable for review of all cases will be prepared with a view to starting the review next financial year once Covid releases resource.
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Also, under this section the timetable, mentioned above, had already been produced to enable periodic review of reliefs and exemptions and progress thus far had been quite pleasing. The assistance provided to customers and the partnership working between teams across all councils and the ARP teams had been a great piece of work by all.

The Chairman, Councill Ambrose-Smith referred to paragraph 3.10 of the

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report in respect of the appeal from Hospitals for business rate relief that had been withdrawn and reminded Members that this could have ended up being a huge cost to the Partnership.

The Service Delivery Plan and Risk Register was otherwise noted.

21/21 PERFORMANCE REPORTS (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 8)

Adrian Mills, Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) presented the reports.

He was pleased to report that all partner authorities combined for 2020/2021 were on target; however, the Council Tax collection rates for Breckland, East Suffolk and Fenland DCs were behind target, due to the magistrate's courts not being open at the time and therefore reducing the amount that could have been collected.

The Enforcement Team had also recently taken on the collection of parking fines for East and West Suffolk Council's and were due to receive its first cases shortly.

With effect from March 2020, all recovery actions were temporarily suspended until the summer and therefore the amount collected through these actions had been less than in the last financial year. Income of £680K in total had been received this financial year compared to £1.37M last year.

The 3 March 2021 budget, the Government announced that retail, hospitality and leisure relief would be extended into the 2021/22 financial year but from 1 July 2021 would be reduced to 66%. Revised bills would be issued in June 2021 to reduce the rate relief to 66%.

For Council Tax, the Team had completed 17.5% more documents this year compared to last year yet outstanding work had been below the highest levels it reached the previous year.

The Council Tax Support Hardship Fund awards were issued to every qualifying working age customer by the end of July 2020 and have continued to award a payment to every entitled new working age Council Tax Support customer who made a claim throughout the year. Expenditure had been closely monitored to ensure the fund for each Council had not been overspent.

Targets had been achieved for both Council Tax Support and Benefits performance, despite the increased demand attributed to COVID-19.

Throughout the year the Team had seen significant increases in claims and had increased by approximately a third on 2019/2020. In April 2020, the Local Council Tax Support schemes changed for all partners to include a 'tolerance rule' which was applied to monthly Universal Credit Data Share (UCDS) records from DWP.

The new rule meant that changes in Universal Credit of under £15.00 per week were ignored by the software system and were automatically processed. An average of just under 4000 UCDS records had been received weekly from the DWP and 53% of these had been fully automated. The introduction of the 'tolerance' rule had reduced the number of Council Tax Support re-assessments resulting from DWP UCDS records by 32%, which

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was in line with the results of modelling undertaken for the consultation. This in turn had reduced the number of Council Tax adjustment notices, contact and refund requests and allowed customers more flexibility to manage their own payments.

The COVID 19 Track & Trace Self Isolation payment scheme had been extended by 3 months to 30 June 2021.

For 2021/22 all targets combined for all partner councils were on target except for Council Tax collections for Breckland and Business Rates collections for East Cambridgeshire DC.

For enforcement, £426K had been collected in April compared to £304k at the same point last year.

The Government had announced that they would fund further discretionary rate relief to businesses, further guidance was awaited.

In respect of benefits, performance had been achieved despite the increased demand attributed to Covid-19.

The Chairman referred to the Better Customer Journeys Programme in respect of who had set the complaint response timeframes from 28 to 21 calendar days. Members were informed that this was a 21day target that had been set by the Customer Strategy Team. More emphasis would be put on customer self-service sign-up which would have a quicker outcome.

Councillor Broughton asked if on-line forms were immediately uploaded onto the system. The Strategic Manager (Billing & benefits) explained that once the forms had been validated, they were then dealt with in the 'back office' system for those staff to pick up. The customer was in control of their data, but improvements were being made to this system.

The performance reports were otherwise noted.

22/21 WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 9)

Adrian Mills, Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) presented the report and updated Members with the following information.

At paragraph 2.18 - DWP were yet to publish a review of the CAB Help to Claim service but had confirmed that the CAB arrangement would continue into the 2021-2022 year, with a review underway for provision from 2022.

At paragraph 2.19 Members were informed that the Harrogate pilot had recommenced, the Pensioner Benefit would remain until at least 2025 and the £20 per week uplift for Universal Credit had been extended until September 2021.

Councillor Cowen raised concerns about the Help to Claim Service in respect of Breckland and South Norfolk's CAB service having been reduced and ultimately a real challenge for its customers.

The Strategic Manager (Billing & Benefits) was aware of some of the difficulties, but he hoped that DWP would take a wider look at the contracts in 2022. This matter would be discussed further.

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Councillor Cowen also asked if the partnership would be looking at doing something itself rather than it being between DWP and the CAB.

Members were informed that until ARP had scope of the project itself and the terms nothing could be considered.

Councillor Cowen stated that all ARP Members could use their MPs but a briefing note would be helpful.

It was agreed that a briefing note would be prepared for Members to use when contacting their MPs.

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The Welfare Reform update was otherwise noted.

23/21 Q4 ARP FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2020-21 (AGENDA ITEM 10)

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

Each of the partner Councils provided full year financial information against budget for the ARP. The information had been collated to provide an overall financial performance report, to provide information to Joint Committee on the out-turn against budget.

The final out-turn for 2021 had increased slightly with an overspend against budget of £551K – further information relating to this overspend could be found at Appendix A

Councillor Broughton was aware that the overspend was mainly due to the delay to enforcement work but asked how long it would take the Partnership to get back on track.

Members were informed that an update would be provided in the quarterly financial reports for the current year.

Councillor Cowen felt that this was due to the impact of the pandemic that everyone faced but the Partnership was in a much better place than many other authorities and hopefully all would be back to normal in the next 12 months.

In response to a question, it was explained that the Joint Committee Agreement set out the variation in shares between each authority which could also be seen on the table under paragraph 1.4 of the report. The percentage shares for this area were based on the enforcement caseloads and number of properties as per the Agreement.

Councillor Cook hoped that this would be the only time that Members would see a deficit.

RESOLVED that:

1. the report and appendix be noted; and
2. the final full year variance as at 31 March 2021 be shared between the partner authorities in the approved shares.

24/21 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 11)

Members were informed that ARP had successfully appointed to the post of Jo Andrews who retired earlier in the year. The new post holder was from Harrogate and would commence employment early in September 2021.

25/21 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The arrangements for the next meeting on Tuesday, 21 September 2021 at 11am were noted. Venue would be confirmed near the time.

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The meeting closed at 11.40 am

CHAIRMAN