

Report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee: 21 September 2021

Report number:	CAB/WS/21/045	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	9 November 2021
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Decisions Plan: This item is not required to be included on the Decisions Plan.

Wards impacted: All wards

Recommendation: The Cabinet is requested to note the content of Report number: CAB/WS/21/045, being the report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee.

1. Context to this report

1.1 On 21 September 2021, the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership (ARP) Joint Committee met where the following items of substantive business were discussed:

1. Performance Reports
2. Welfare Reform Update
3. ARP Financial Performance 2021 to 2022
4. Forthcoming Issues

This report is for information only. No decisions are required by the Cabinet.

2. Updates within this report

2.1 Performance Report: July 2021 (agenda item 5)

2.1.1 a. Joint Committee performance report: July 2021

The Joint Committee received and **noted** an update on performance. This report provides relevant information relating to the performance of ARP as a whole and that of the individual partners. This detailed report can be viewed on Breckland Council's website at the following link:

[Performance Report 2021-22 July.pdf \(breckland.gov.uk\)](https://www.breckland.gov.uk/Performance%20Report%202021-22%20July.pdf)

The reports indicated that when considering performance as a whole for all partner councils, all targets for the 2021 to 2022 financial year were presently being met in respect of the following categories:

- Business rates collection
- Council tax collection
- Number of electronic forms received
- Fraud and compliance

2.1.2 In respect of West Suffolk Council's individual performance, all targets were presently being met for the 2021 to 2022 financial year in respect of the following categories:

- Business rates collection
- Local council tax reduction
- Housing benefit
- Fraud and compliance

2.1.3 Attention was drawn to the service updates:

- a. **Enforcement:** ARP's enforcement agency have resumed visits with appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and amounts collected by the team have risen back to near normal levels. ARP

continue to try and engage with customers offering long term payment arrangements and assisting customers where possible. As at 31 July 2021, £383,262 had been collected compared to £227,543 at the same point last year. The team had also taken on the collection of parking fines for East Suffolk and West Suffolk with positive results on collection.

- b. **Further recovery:** As at 31 July 2021, collection was £383,698 which was £167,441 more than for same point last year. This was not at the same level as 2019; however, the team was increasing momentum and seeing excellent results.
- c. **Non-domestic rates:** Work is progressing to commence the reviews on reductions; this had been delayed due to an issue with the electronic forms test system. Volumes of work are stable and progress has been made to reduce the aged processes so that a higher volume of work is completed within targeted deadlines. Work was due to commence on the new quality assurance procedures which allow training needs and inconsistencies in processing to be identified.
- d. **Council tax:** Demand for council tax billing continues at very high levels due to the effects of Covid-19. A significant proportion of this was due to people taking advantage of the stamp duty holiday and moving home. However, outstanding work continues to be below the peaks previously experienced which can be attributed to the project to introduce Generic Council Tax Billing Officers. This provides a resilient team who have been able to switch between billing and benefits to help cope with ever changing workloads and priorities during the pandemic and has provided increased flexibility in the use of ARP's resources.

In the 2020 to 2021 financial year, formal recovery proceedings were delayed and some customers had sought extensions into the 2021 to 2022 financial year. This may impact on this year's collection and the situation will be closely monitored.

- e. **Benefits:** Both Council Tax Support and Benefits performance has achieved targets, despite the increased demand attributed to Covid-19 and the usual increased demand generated by issuing annual council tax bills and uprating notifications.

ARP continues to see significant increases in demand, particularly increases in change of addresses as people take advantage of the extended stamp duty holiday and low interest rates.

Since the end of September 2020, ARP has worked with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) to implement the Covid-19 Test and Trace Self-Isolation payment scheme. This scheme pays £500 to each eligible person notified of a requirement to self-isolate and has now been extended to end on 30 September 2021. It

also now includes provision for parents of school age children required to self isolate being able to apply for a payment.

- f. **Fraud and compliance:** The fraud team are now visiting domestic (unoccupied) and business premises with appropriate Covid safety measures in place. Desk based fraud and compliance work continues, which is undertaken by fraud team officers working from home.

Both Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils have committed to continue providing funding for fraud and compliance work until March 2022, at which point a further review will take place.

During the pandemic it has not been possible to interview customers under caution on a face-to-face basis. Advice has been taken from the Law Society and the Crown Prosecution Service in relation to alternative methods of interviewing under caution. With assistance from the solicitor used for ARP Fraud prosecutions it has been agreed that customers will be interviewed by letter and a process and procedure has been set up to enable this. A number of sanctions have now been conducted using this process. Rooms are now being assessed to ascertain whether face-to-face interviews can be conducted safely.

The fraud and compliance team have yet again had an exceptional start to the new financial year in terms of identifying customer fraud across the partnership.

- g. **ARP systems and digital:** Work is progressing with Capita to review their digital product where it is currently being utilised by other local authorities to gain feedback from a wider group of Capita users. Knowledge and experiences are being shared, which will potentially benefit ARP in the future.

Work volumes with both System Administration and EDMS have been quite high but a strong plan of priorities has been devised to ensure resources can meet expectations and demands.

- h. **Better Customer Journeys Programme:** Through the Better Customer Journeys Programme, ARP is continuing to improve the customer experience through the automation project or streamlining processes, which in turn is helping to make self-service the customer-preferred option. The system to automate council tax payers' change of address was launched with Fenland DC in July 2021, and was subsequently rolled out in Breckland, East Cambs, East Suffolk and West Suffolk in August 2021, which has supported ARP's increase in response time.

- 2.1.4 Discussion was specifically held at the meeting on a number of topics including the discussions had with Cambridgeshire County Council in respect of a business case for the provision of a county fraud hub. Members were

updated on the current position including that the project was progressing well.

2.2 **Welfare reform update (agenda item 6)**

2.2.1 The Joint Committee **noted** an update on welfare reform, which included:

- a. **Universal Credit (UC):** Although the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are yet to publish a review of the Citizens' Advice Help to Claim service, they have confirmed the Citizens' Advice arrangement will continue into the 2021 to 2022 year, DWP had however, recently requested expressions of interest from public, private and voluntary sectors to deliver a digital and telephony 'Help to Claim' service from April 2022. DWP intended to take responsibility back from Citizens' Advice for face-to-face assistance.

The Customer Services Team, comprising partners' Heads of Customer Service support ARP's view that the best fit for residents would be for DWP to take full responsibility for helping customers to claim UC, a benefit they administer. To provide a seamless service DWP could utilise their existing digital and telephony capability to provide assistance to supplement their face-to-face Job Centre capability.

The summary of the latest position on the expansion of UC and concerns raised by officers regarding specific issues in respect of the expansion on a national level were contained in sections 2.1.9 and 2.2 of the report, and which were duly noted by the Joint Committee. This included confirmation that the temporary increase in UC rate by £20 a week as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, will cease on 30 September 2021.

- b. **Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP):** For the 2020 to 2021 financial year, the DWP increased funding to offset the impact of private sector rents increasing above the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates used to calculate housing benefit. Funding for 2021 to 2022 has returned to 2019/2020 levels, despite concerns the pandemic will increase demand throughout this year. ARP are in close conversations with individual Housing teams to plan, profile and monitor demand and expenditure to meet requirements to ensure full spend, but not to exceed funding levels, given a budget does not exist to top up.
- c. **Benefit cap:** In November 2016, the maximum family income before the benefit cap applies reduced from £26,000 to £20,000 (£13,400 for single adults with no children). The Benefit Service continues to work with colleagues in Customer Service and Housing Options teams to seek to avoid homelessness and the cost of temporary housing.

- d. **Social rented sector rent restrictions:** The Government has responded to consultation on funding for supported housing, removing proposals to move away from a subsidised demand led model to a grant model. For the foreseeable future, supported accommodation, including hostel tenancies will remain in within the Housing Benefit service and will not therefore move to Universal Credit.
- e. **Welfare benefit uprating – April 2021:** The Government has confirmed an end to the four year benefit uprating freeze in 2020. From April 2021, all benefits increased by the September 2020 Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) measure, which equates to 0.5 per cent for the state pension rising by 2.5 per cent due to the 'Triple Lock' (lower of CPI, average earnings or 2.5 percent).

2.2.2 Further details are contained in the report at:

[Welfare Reform Report](#)

2.2.3 Discussion was particularly held at the meeting on the DWP's intention to bring face to face support for Universal Credit claimants back in house, and the implications of this.

2.4 **ARP Financial Performance 2021 to 2022 (agenda item 7)**

2.4.1 The Joint Committee **noted** the financial performance report which presented the forecast full year financial position against budget for the ARP.

The forecast at this stage shows a small underspend against budget of £55,231 for the whole of the partnership. The reasons for the specific variances, together with other details, are contained in the report at:

[ARP Financial Performance 2021 to 2022](#)

[Appendix A](#)

2.4.2 An update was also provided on the remaining transformation funding which had been set aside in previous years. £97,000 has been earmarked for projects in progress in 2021 to 2022 and there is a further £133,000 available for future transformation projects.

2.4.3 Details of the funding held in the ARP ICT reserve, which had been approved as part of the budget setting process, was also contained in Appendix A.

2.5 **Forthcoming issues (agenda item 8)**

- 2.5.1 Members were informed that a meeting involving Leaders and Chief Executives of the partnership's authorities was to be arranged in due course to discuss the future strategic direction of the ARP and for this to inform a four-year business plan to commence from April 2022.

3. Minutes

- 3.1 For further information on the discussions held at the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee meeting on 21 September 2021, the draft minutes of the meeting may be viewed on Breckland District Council's website at the following link:

[Minutes](#)

4. Background papers

- 4.1 Breckland DC Website:

[21 September 2021](#)