

Report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee: 20 September 2022

Report number:	CAB/WS/22/051	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	18 October 2022
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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/22/051, being the report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee.

1. Context to this report

1.1 On 20 September 2022, the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership (ARP) Joint Committee met where the following items of substantive business were discussed:

1. Performance Report: July 2022
2. Welfare Reform Update
3. ARP Forecast Financial Performance
4. Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme Update
5. Forthcoming Issues

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

2. Updates within this report

2.1 Performance Report (agenda item 5)

2.1.1 a. Joint Committee performance report: July 2022

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 2022-2023 July 2022.pdf \(breckland.gov.uk\)](https://www.breckland.gov.uk/Performance%20Report%202022-2023%20July%202022.pdf)

The reports indicated that when considering performance as a whole for all partner councils, all targets for the 2022 to 2023 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, with the exception of council tax collection, all targets were presently being met for the 2022 to 2023 financial year in respect of the following categories:

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

The council tax collection rate was currently narrowly below target; the situation was being closely monitored.

2.1.3 Attention was drawn to the service updates:

- a. **Enforcement:** As at 31 July 2022, the total collected for the 2022 to 2023 financial year to date was £1,314,657 debt with an additional £277,833 in fees.
- b. **Further recovery:** Collection as at 31 July 2022 has strongly continued with £339,143 being collected to date.
- c. **Non-domestic rates:** Overall collection across the partnership has exceeded target. Work is continuing on the reviews on Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) reductions which have now commenced on a rolling basis. All authorities have been continuing to process applications for the COVID-19 Additional Relief Fund (CARF); however, as at July 2022, uptake by eligible businesses had been slow.
- d. **Council tax:** Demand for council tax billing continues at very high levels due to the effects of COVID-19 with a significant proportion being due to people 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 and has provided increased flexibility in the use of ARP's resources.

Collection is overall for the whole partnership back on target at July 2022. The additional Council Tax Energy Rebates paid has had a beneficial effect; however, the position will be closely monitored in light of the wider economic position.

News remained awaited on the return of information from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in relation to a Cabinet Office pilot to share data to provide information, there had been disappointing news. HMRC will not release all of their data on cases unless a date of birth or National Insurance number is known. This means that there are a substantial number of cases to progress.

Government guidance was met to pay the £150 Council Tax Energy Rebate to all direct debit customers by the end of April 2022 and by the end of June 2022, ARP had paid 100 percent of main scheme payments. The discretionary scheme automatic allocations took place during July 2022 with the final allocations to council tax accounts planned for early August 2022.

- e. **Benefits:** Both council tax support and benefits performance has achieved targets, despite the increased demand attributed to economic recovery from COVID-19.

ARP continues to see significant increases in demand, particularly increases in change of addresses and continue to utilise generically trained staff to focus resource where it is most needed.

The final allocations of funding for the COVID-19 Test and Trace self isolation payment scheme were received in July 2022.

The 2022 to 2023 changes to the Council Tax Support scheme had been successfully implemented. The increase in the tolerance rule had been particularly beneficial, streamlining the scheme with less requirement for evidence and longer term steady awards which enables customers to manage their own finances more easily.

- f. **Fraud and compliance:** Work has been continuing to extend the Fraud and Compliance work of East Cambridgeshire and Fenland District Councils to the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub with both councils approving a business case to allow this element of the project to move forward. This in turn would generate fraud-related savings for the partnership.

Both Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils have committed to continue providing funding for fraud and compliance work for two years from April 2022.

Reviews of the Fraud Service at Broadland and South Norfolk District Councils have been undertaken on a consultancy basis by officers of the ARP. This may allow opportunities to extend this offer to other partners.

- 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 Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) have been quite high but a strong plan of priorities has been devised to ensure resources can meet expectations and demands.

The Systems team have focussed heavily on the implementation of the Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme. The process for the main scheme continued into May 2022 and by the end of June 2022, on behalf of the partners, ARP was placed in the top four percent of authorities across the country that had successfully administered 100 percent of the main scheme.

- h. **Better Customer Experience Programme:** Customer take-up for the online council tax change of address service is above expectations with up to 50 percent of customers currently using the facility against an anticipated 30 percent, which is testament to excellent work with

customers and the effectiveness of the new online form. The project team is now outlining the automation of direct debit submissions which will complement the change of address service already on offer.

The report outlined additional specific automation and digital measures in place, and being explored, which all aim to improve the customer experience.

- 2.1.4 Discussion was specifically held at the meeting on a number of topics with specific reference given to recognising the strong performance in fraud and compliance work; further recovery work; and the excellent achievement for ranking within the top four percent of authorities that under the main scheme, had successfully paid out the Council Tax Energy Rebate to eligible households by the end of June 2022.

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):** It was announced at the end of January 2022 that the Help to Claim scheme has been renewed for a further year. Ministers confirmed that Citizens Advice will continue to deliver independent support and from April 2022 and that the support will be provided through telephony and digital channels. Individuals who are unable to access support via these channels will be supported by the local jobcentres.

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 2.1.14 and 2.2 of the report, and which were duly noted by the Joint Committee. This included that in May 2022, DWP announced that the first two UC migration trial sites would be Bolton and Medway. During the trial there will be more focus on customers moving over independently and a test and learn approach will continue. It is understood that 500 claimants will be written to and given three months to make a claim for Universal Credit.

The three-month deadline for the trial ran into the second week of August 2022 with one-month extensions given. A further 250 letters were issued in July 2022 trialling a different approach and the trial

has been expanded into Cornwall. Further information and updates was awaited on a wider roll-out programme.

- b. **Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP):** Funding for 2022 to 2023 is being allocated in two allocations with national funding of £100 million in April 2022 and £2 million mid-year, a reduction of £38 million overall (27 percent). ARP is working closely with Housing teams and other stakeholders to devise a process to help manage the reduced budget to assist customers with shortfalls in their rent
- 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.

The Benefits Service continues to work with colleagues in Customer Service and the Housing Options teams to seek to avoid homelessness and assist with 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 2022:** The Government ended the four year benefit uprating freeze in 2020. However, the link between pensions and the 'Triple Lock' was severed in September 2021 because of wage inflation. Instead in 2022 to 2023, the state pension will rise in line with the highest inflation rate or 2.5 percent. The Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) rate for September 2021 is historically the figure used, reported at 3.1 percent. This figure has risen considerably since then.
- f. **Homes for Ukraine scheme:** DWP confirmed in circular A4/2022 that there will be no impact on housing benefit for anyone entering into the Homes for Ukraine scheme. As such, the £350 'thank you' payment will be disregarded as income and there would be no non-dependant deductions applied. The same disregards are also covered in the prescribed Local Council Tax Reduction scheme for pensioners and ARP has provisions in all the partners' Local Council Tax Support schemes for working age customers to disregard such payments.

2.2.2 At the meeting, a number of questions were asked. The report was duly noted.

2.2.3 Further details are contained in the report at:

[Welfare Reform Report](#)

2.4 **ARP forecast financial performance (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 as at 31 July 2022, showed an overspend against budget of £632,952 (6.39 percent) for the whole of the partnership, with approximately £515,000 of this relating to the national pay award. Although not yet agreed, the latest proposals of a flat rate award of £1,925 per employee would have an adverse impact on the budgeted award of two percent. The Joint Committee will be kept abreast of mitigation measures to address this and other cost pressures. Other reasons for the specific variances, are contained in the report at:

[ARP Forecast Financial Performance Report](#)

[Appendix 1](#)

2.4.2 Appendix 1 also provides details on the remaining transformation funding which was set aside in previous years from below budget spend and grant funding. £47,000 is earmarked for projects in progress or due next year and there is a further £96,000 available for future transformation projects. The appendix also provides detail on the values held and earmarked in the ICT reserve, which was introduced to smooth the financial effects of major ICT spend.

2.4.3 The table below shows the share of the forecast outturn for each partner based on the Joint Committee constitutional agreement; however, this will change for the final values at the end of March 2023:

	Actual outturn (£)
Breckland	111,096
East Cambridgeshire	65,175
East Suffolk	229,026
Fenland	87,998
West Suffolk	139,657
Total	632,952

2.4.4 Discussion was specifically held at the meeting on a number of topics including the details for the variances outlined in Appendix 1 with particular reference to suppliers and services; employee costs; and income generation.

2.5 **Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme update (agenda item 8)**

2.5.1 The Joint Committee considered this [report](#), which provided an update on the Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme.

2.5.2 In February 2022, the Government announced a council tax rebate grant of £150 for all households in council tax bands A to D in England, or for those in band E in receipt of disabled band reduction. The grant is part of a £22 billion support package to help households with the rising cost of energy bills.

2.5.3 The announcement also funded a discretionary scheme to provide assistance to households living in E to H band properties or to residents suffering financial hardship in band A to D properties.

2.5.4 The report provided details on the main and discretionary schemes and how they were being operated and administered for all five partner authorities by ARP.

2.5.5 As at end of August 2022, the latest position was that ARP had:

- Paid 100 percent of main scheme payments by the end of June 2022.
- Paid over 80 percent of discretionary payments (this included all of the automatic allocations for direct debit and non-direct debit payers) thereby providing additional assistance to vulnerable households in a timely manner.
- Established a residual discretionary pot to help additional households who are impacted by rising energy costs.
- The exceptional discretionary claim form went live on the ARP website in July 2022.
- The first exceptional discretionary payments commenced the second week in August 2022.

2.5.6 The report also provided details of the total payments made on behalf of each partner authority. For West Suffolk Council, a total of over £6.3 million had been paid out under the main scheme, with a further £270,300 to be paid out from the discretionary scheme, of which over 80 percent had been paid as at September 2022.

2.5.7 At the end of June 2022:

The five ARP partner Councils were in the top four percent in England, and amongst only 11 authorities, out of 308, who had paid 100 percent of their main scheme payments.

Out of the 45 councils in the East of England, ARP's five partners were the only councils to have paid 100 percent of the main scheme payments by the end of June.

2.5.8 At the meeting the Joint Committee held detailed discussion on the use and management of the dedicated helpline that had been set up to support recipients of the rebate; and the potential reasons for the success in ensuring eligible households received the payment in a timely manner.

2.5.9 The Joint Committee congratulated all involved for the successful operation and administration of both the main and discretionary schemes.

2.5.10 Recognition was also given to the importance of trying to increase customer uptake of utilising the direct debit method for making/receiving payments.

2.6 **Forthcoming issues (agenda item 9)**

2.6.1 A discussion was held on the requirement for meetings of the Joint Committee, which were held in public and where on occasion decisions were made, to be held in person, rather than via virtual means.

3. **Minutes**

3.1 For further information on the discussions held at the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee meeting on 20 September 2022, the draft minutes of the meeting may be viewed on Breckland District Council's website at the following link:

[Printed minutes 20th-Sep-2022 10.00 Anglia Revenues Benefits Partnership Joint Committee.pdf \(breckland.gov.uk\)](#)

4. **Background papers**

4.1 Breckland DC Website:

[20 September 2022](#)