

Report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee: 5 March 2024

Report number:	CAB/WS/24/023	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	21 May 2024
Cabinet member:	Councillor Diane Hind Portfolio Holder for Resources Email: diane.hind@westsuffolk.gov.uk	
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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/24/023, being the report of the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee.

1. Context to this report

1.1 On 5 March 2024, the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership (ARP) Joint Committee met where the following items of substantive business were discussed:

1. Performance report
2. ARP forecast financial performance
3. Welfare reform update
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 (agenda item 5)

2.1.1 The Joint Committee received and **noted** an update on performance up to 31 December 2023.

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 Quarter 3 2023-2024](#)

The report indicated that when considering performance as a whole for all partner councils, all targets for the 2023 to 2024 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 local council tax reduction and housing benefit, all targets were currently being met for the 2023 to 2024 financial year in respect of the following categories:

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

The number of days to process new claims for council tax reduction and change in circumstances is slightly over the 9 day target. This was being focussed on in January 2024 with aim of meeting the target.

The number of days to process housing benefit in Quarter 3 is short of the eight day target at 10.72 days. This can be attributed to the additional workload placed on ARP to administer support schemes; however, these have now ended. An ICT issue had also affected the automation of Universal Credit records which had impacted on the resource requirements within the Benefits team. This has been resolved; and whilst performance has improved since Quarter 2, it is not anticipated that the target will be met by the end of the financial year.

2.1.3 Attention was drawn to the service updates:

- a. **Enforcement:** As at 31 December 2023, the total collected for the 2023 to 2024 financial year was just over £3.2 million pounds in debt repayment with an additional £935,834 in fees.
- b. **Further recovery:** The strong performance is continuing with a total of £1,119,077 being collected by the end the third quarter, which exceeds the total amount of monies collected for the whole of 2022 to 2023.
- c. **Council tax:** Overall collection for council tax in the third quarter was on target for the majority of the partner councils including West Suffolk.

Demand for council tax billing remained high; however, with the recruitment of additional Council Tax Billing Officers in July 2023, this has assisted with easing the workload.

At the end of last year, the Government announced a new £100 million Council Tax Support Fund for 2023 to 2024 to help economically vulnerable residents with their council tax bills. The majority of allocations were applied directly to 2023 to 2024 council tax bills during annual billing, with the remaining funds being used to provide additional support to new council tax reduction claimants throughout the 2023 to 2024 year and additional exceptional hardship funds for vulnerable council tax payers.

- d. **Benefits:** Targets for the processing of benefits in the third quarter have currently been missed by all partner councils. See 2.1.2 above regarding West Suffolk's current position. ARP are addressing this issue to help improve performance in these areas with focus days being planned for January 2024.

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 two Government funded Energy Bills Support Schemes (alternative funding) have now closed.

The DWP held a successful face-to-face workshop at ARP to help them understand the difficulties and complexities of administering housing benefit for supported and specified accommodation as the time taken to process these claims is far greater than the general housing benefit claims that are due to migrate to Universal Credit (UC). The Government is expected to announce a full UC roll-out plan for the remaining legacy benefits, including housing benefit, in the new year.

- e. **Non-domestic rates:** The overall collection rate for each partner authority is currently above target at the end of the third quarter of 2023 to 2024.

A new NDR Valuation list came into effect on 1 April 2023 where every property has been assigned a property value. This means changes are being administered from the 2017 and 2023 Valuation Office Agency (VOA) lists. Apart from a handful of outstanding appeals, the 2010 list is now closed.

The review of Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) reductions has been completed in quarter three thus meeting the internal audit deadline.

- f. **ARP systems and digital:** Work is progressing with ARP's supplier to review their digital product where it is currently being utilised by other local authorities to gain feedback from a wider group of 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.

Success has been had on automating web-based direct debits and testing has begun on refund automation. These projects will help complement the move to automation and it is anticipated that progress will be seen during Quarter 4 following some system enhancements and fixes. Other automation projects are in the pipeline.

- g. **Fraud and compliance:** The Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub became operational in Quarter 1, which provides fraud-related savings for the partnership, with encouraging early results in Quarter 3.

Both Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils have continued providing funding for fraud and compliance work for two years from April 2022. This funding includes the premium matching service for both East and West Suffolk, providing for an additional post within the team. Fraud work commenced for Broadland and South Norfolk in Quarter 2 although a change in software supplier has impacted this work.

A s113 agreement with Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) and the seven district councils within the Lincolnshire district, had been established to provide these councils with single person discount fraud services; however, ARP has since received notification that LCC has withdrawn funding for ARP to undertake their single person discount reviews within their seven district councils.

To improve the registration of new properties, the Visiting Team are trialling a new database containing details of new properties in Fenland. This trial has been expanded to East and West Suffolk Councils with results expected in January 2024.

- h. **Better Customer Experience Programme:** ARP is in the final stages of development in preparation for the launch of its new Contact Us form. This will help enhance the customer experience by capturing all required information within the one form.

The report also outlined additional specific continuing automation projects and digital measures in place, and those being explored, which all aim to improve the customer experience. This included working with West Suffolk Council's ICT team on ARP's telephony project.

2.1.4 Discussion was specifically held at the meeting on:

- the reasons for all partner authorities not meeting the processing of council tax reduction claims and housing benefit claims targets in Quarter 3 and the actions in place to mitigate this.
- The success of the Fraud and Compliance Team in terms of the amount of fraud being identified. As such, whether more emphasis should be placed on making potential applicants for discounts more aware of the eligibility criteria to prevent claims being made where they were not necessarily entitled. This may include highlighting potential fines that could be imposed for fraudulent claims.
- Of the amount of fraud identified, the amount actually recovered.
- Details of tenancy fraud and the implications of this.
- A briefing paper would be provided to members to define fraud; the quantity being identified; and the amount of monies being recovered.

2.2 **ARP forecast financial performance report 2023 to 2024 (agenda item 6)**

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

The forecast as at 31 December 2023, showed an overspend against budget of £185,831 (1.76 percent) for the whole of the partnership. This was mainly due to the recently agreed national staff pay award which was higher than original budget estimates, and the significant increase in Royal Mail

postage charges that came into effect in October 2023. Other reasons for the specific variances, are contained in the report at:

[ARP Forecast Financial Performance Report](#)

[Appendix A](#)

- 2.2.2 The current budget includes an efficiency target of £100,000, rising to £200,000 in future years. The 100,000 target has been met for 2023 to 2024 and work is underway to achieve the £200,000 target that had been set in the budget for 2024 to 2025.
- 2.2.3 Appendix A also provides details on the remaining transformation funding which was set aside in previous years from below budget spend and grant funding. £52,000 is earmarked for projects in progress or due next year and there is a further £64,000 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.
- 2.2.4 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 2024:

	Actual outturn (£)
Breckland	20,291
East Cambridgeshire	17,034
East Suffolk	76,287
Fenland	36,641
West Suffolk	35,578
Total	185,831

2.3 **Welfare reform update (agenda item 7)**

- 2.3.1 a. **'Help to Claim' scheme:** The Minister of State for Employment had announced that the 'Help to Claim' scheme operated by Citizens' Advice will be extended to March 2024 with support being considered post April 2024. The outcome of the bid for the continuing operation of the scheme should have been announced in December 2023 but was yet to materialise.
- b. **Universal Credit (UC):** 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 2.1.15 and 2.2 of the report, and which were duly noted by the Joint Committee.

The expansion of 'Move to UC' continues with this work taking place in Southeast Wales and Central Scotland in October 2023 with Southwest Scotland in November 2023.

A plan for the 2024 to 2025 migration has now been decided and would be based on benefit types starting with income support cases followed by Employment Support Allowance (ESA) with tax credits and then the Jobseekers allowance. Housing benefits only cases and housing benefit with tax credits would follow. A gradual movement should be seen in terms of housing benefit cases for this year and into April 2025.

Work has already been carried out and the implications for the partnership. Guidance was still awaited, but in the interim an all-local authority conference call would be taking place on 15 March 2024.

- c. **Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP):** DWP are proposing to retain the current methodology for DHP allocations with a two-year funding freeze with allocations to be paid in one upfront payment. This is to retain consistency and help local authorities plan.

DHP allocations for the financial year ending March 2025 will remain the same as the previous two years as part of the two-year funding freeze.

- d. **Benefit cap:** From April 2023, the maximum family income before the benefit cap applies rose from £20,000 to £22,020 (from £13,400 to £14,753 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.

It was announced in the Autumn Statement in November 2022 that the benefit cap would rise by 10.1 percent in line with Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) from April 2023. This means that 60,000 households are no longer capped, 130,000 receive more support and 30,000 are out of the scope of the cap.

- e. **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.
- f. **Welfare benefit uprating – April 2024:** 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 rose 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 then at 3.1 percent. This figure has risen considerably since then and it was announced in the Autumn Statement in November 2023 that from April 2024, the state pension and other benefits will increase by 8.5 percent under the 'Triple Lock' guarantee. Certain benefits, including UC, will also rise by 6.7 percent.

- g. **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.

2.3.2 At the meeting, a number of topics were discussed, particularly in respect of timelines potentially being affected by the outcome of the forthcoming General Election; and the relationship between DWP and Citizens Advice and the potential implications for ARP.

2.3.3 Further details are contained in the report at:

[Welfare Reform Update](#)

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

2.4.1 At the meeting, the Chair advised that it was Adrian Mills', Head of ARP, last meeting before his retirement.

2.4.2 Members joined the Chair in paying tributes to Mr Mills for his sterling work and commitment to the partnership.

2.4.3 Lorraine King has been appointed as the new Head of ARP. The Joint Committee placed their support on record regarding Ms King's appointment and wished her well in her new role.

3. **Minutes**

3.1 For further information on the discussions held at the Anglia Revenues and Benefits Partnership Joint Committee meeting on 5 March 2024, 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:

[5 March 2024](#)