

A G E N D A

ANGLIA REVENUES & BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

DATE & TIME Tuesday, 5th March, 2024 at 10.00 am

VENUE: Virtual meeting via Teams

For the attention of:

CLlr Paul Ashton, East Suffolk Council (Chairman)
CLlr Diane Hind, West Suffolk Council (Vice-Chairman)
CLlr Philip Cowen, Breckland District Council
CLlr Jan French, Fenland District Council
CLlr James Lay, East Cambridgeshire District Council

Should members of the public wish to attend this meeting, please email
democraticservices@breckland.gov.uk

	<u>Page(s) herewith</u>
1. <u>MINUTES</u> To confirm the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2023.	1 - 7
2. <u>APOLOGIES</u> To receive apologies for absence.	
3. <u>URGENT BUSINESS</u> To note whether the Chairman proposes to accept any items of urgent business pursuant to Section 100(B)(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972.	
4. <u>DECLARATIONS</u>	
5. <u>PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)</u> Report of Matthew Waite-Wright, Head of NNDR Recovery & Enforcement (ARP).	8 - 39
6. <u>ARP FORECAST FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (STANDING ITEM)</u> Report of Alison Chubbock, Assistant Director Finance (BDC).	40 - 44
7. <u>WELFARE REFORM UPDATE (STANDING ITEM)</u> Report of Lorraine King, Head of Benefits, Council Tax Billing & Systems (ARP).	45 - 50

8. **FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)**

To note any items.

9. **NEXT MEETING**

To note the arrangements for the next meeting to be held on Tuesday, 18 June 2024 at 10am. Venue to be confirmed.

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.

Action By

Action By

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.

Action By

OIB

RM

SA

	<u>Action By</u>
<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.

**OIB/
JB**

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.

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).

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.

Action By

**JC
Mbrs**

**All to
Note**

The meeting closed at 10.35 am

CHAIRMAN



Joint Committee Performance Report December 2023



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Anglia
Revenues Partnership

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All Partner Councils Combined



Business Rates Collection					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	£ 67,768,223	£ 139,515,448	£ 203,744,239	£ -	●
Target	£ 61,704,919	£ 128,580,723	£ 191,110,435	£ 239,550,804	
2022/23	£ 59,956,790	£ 126,388,945	£ 182,560,970	£ 222,341,168	●
			Year End Target	£239,550,804	●

Council Tax Collection					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	£152,371,801	£300,004,529	£447,929,019	£ -	●
Target	£151,930,845	£299,624,951	£448,909,622	£ 533,233,453	
2022/23	£149,681,569	£287,091,491	£427,218,713	£508,924,099	●
			Year End Target	£533,233,453	●

Number of Electronic Forms Received					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	18,463	40,278	63,387	0	●
2021/22	14,052	32,059	52,995	76,378	●
			Year End Target	76378	●

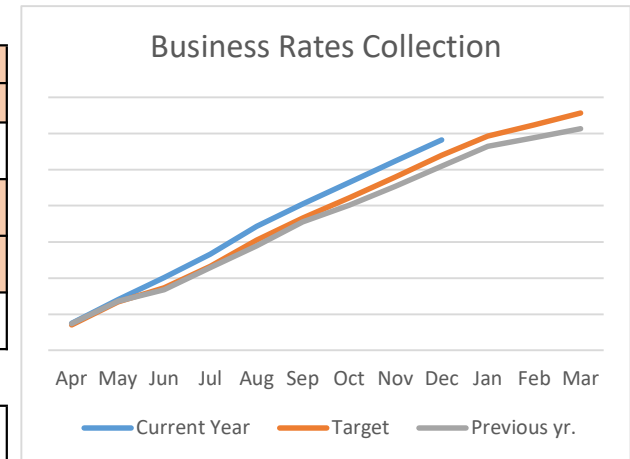
Fraud and Compliance	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Yr Target
Single Person Discount Fraud	£683,416	£1,357,666	£2,029,063	£ -	£1,080,000
Local Council Tax Support	£82,333	£160,769	£232,731	£ -	£322,500
Tenancy Fraud	£279,000	£372,000	£372,000	£ -	£860,000
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	£307,721	£373,091	£488,820	£ -	£537,500
Fraud Identified	£1,352,470	£2,263,526	£3,122,614	£ -	£2,800,000

Performance Information December 2023

Business Rates

Business Rates Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 10,067,781	£ 20,239,464	£ 29,119,017	£ -	●	
Target	£ 8,667,567	£ 18,309,721	£ 26,970,487	£ 32,803,925		
Refunds	£ 332,018	£ 489,472	£ 980,088	£ -		
2022/23	£ 8,392,011	£ 17,755,633	£ 25,449,325	£ 30,645,961	●	

Year End Target	£ 32,803,925	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the NNDR Collection Fund against the actual collection.

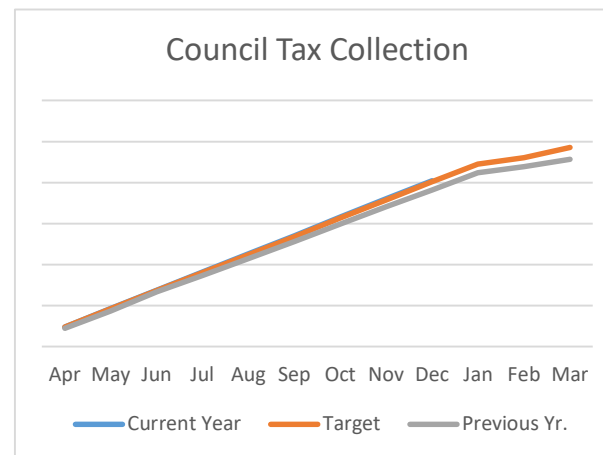
Narrative

Collection has exceeded target in the third quarter, however is slightly behind profile percentage rate for the in year collection. It will be closely monitored in the current economic climate.

Council Tax

Council Tax Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 27,531,029	£ 54,039,505	£ 80,822,642	£ -	●	
Target	£ 27,270,949	£ 53,595,656	£ 80,395,006	£ 97,105,615		
Refunds	£ 233,307	£ 609,555	£ 933,103	£ -		
2022/23	£ 26,680,055	£ 51,256,995	£ 76,440,286	£ 91,393,141	●	

Year End Target	£97,105,615	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the Council Tax Collection Fund against the actual collection.

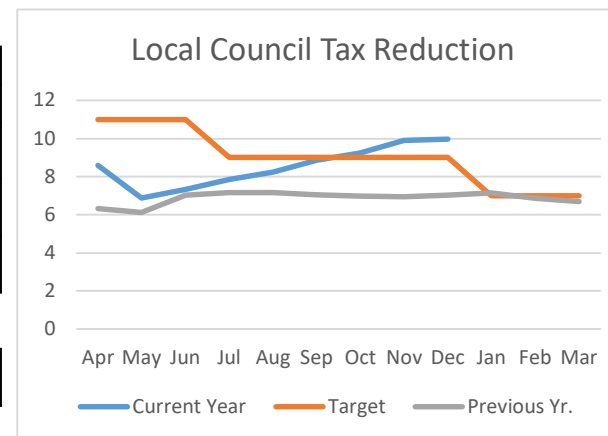
Narrative

Collection is above target at the end of Quarter 3 although the percentage increase has narrowed since the end of Q2. Collection is being closely monitored throughout the year in the current economic climate.

Local Council Tax Reduction

Days to process Local Council Tax Support					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	7.34	8.87	9.97	-	●
Target	11	9	9	7	
2022/23	7.03	7.05	7.03	6.71	●

Year End Target	7	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average year to date number of days to process Council Tax reduction new claims and change of circumstances.

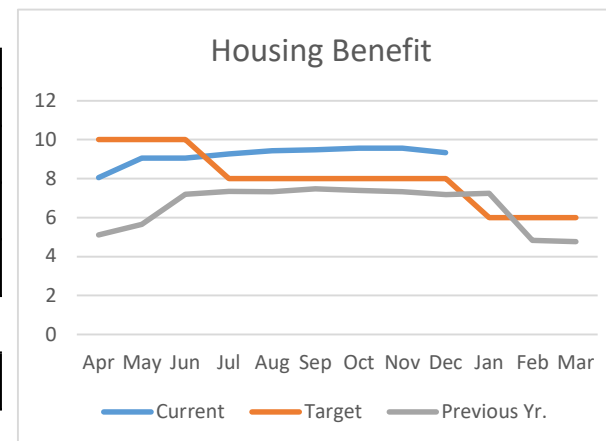
Narrative

The number of days to process Council Tax reduction at the end of Q3 is over the 9 day target by almost a day. A series of focussed work is planned for January to bring this more up to date with a Partnership wide campaign day planned for the end of January ahead of Annual Billing. A software issue which affected performance during Q2 and 3 has now been resolved.

Housing Benefit

Days to process Housing Benefit					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	9.05	9.49	9.33	-	●
Target	10	8	8	6	
2022/23	7.19	7.47	7.03	4.77	●

Year End Target	6	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Housing Benefit new claims and change of circumstances.

Narrative

The number of days to process Housing Benefit in Q3 is above the target of 8 days. Performance has been impacted by the energy schemes which have now closed and a software issue affecting automation of UC records has also impacted resource requirements within Benefits. This has also now been resolved and we aim to meet target by the end of the year and have planned a partnership wide campaign day at the end of January ahead of Annual Billing.

Fraud and Compliance

Fraud and Compliance

Following the transfer of Housing Benefit fraud to the DWP on the 1 September 2015, the team continue to be tasked, in accordance with the Business Case approved by Joint Committee, to identify and prevent fraud leading to an increase in Council Tax income in the following areas:

Local Council Tax Support, Single Person Discount, Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates.

The team continue to proactively seek opportunities to identify dwellings and businesses not registered or having had an undeclared change in use, leading to increased charges – including possible retrospective charges.

The team are also forging closer working relationships with a number of service areas in an attempt prevent and detect fraud and error.

A close working relationship with both Planning Enforcement has resulted in a number of positive outcomes.

More recent discussions with the extended Housing Team has resulted in positive moves and greater planned collaboration

The team continue to work closely with County in the management of the Fraud Hub in Norfolk. This is an attempt to match data sets across County to increase Council Tax and Business Rate income. Funding from Norfolk county continues to support Single Person Discount Reviews. This includes further funding for the roll out of the NFI Premium data matching service in 2023/2024.

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	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Single Person Discount Fraud	£142,373	£243,933	£328,132	£0
Local Council Tax Support	£32,274	£47,239	£57,455	£0
Tenancy Fraud	£0	£0	£0	£0
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	£14,537	£19,061	£25,767	£0
Fraud Identified	£189,185	£310,232	£411,354	£0

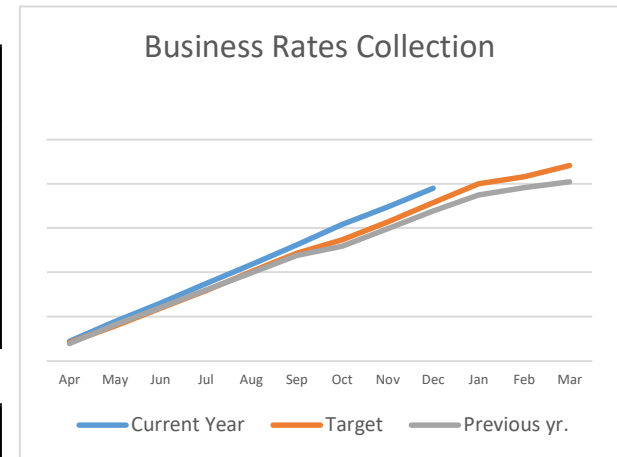


Performance Information December 2023



Business Rates

Business Rates Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 6,536,259	£ 13,090,896	£ 19,510,088	£ -		●
Target	£ 5,951,099	£ 12,180,922	£ 17,842,235	£ 22,071,920		
Refunds	£ 271,670	£ 329,367	£ 849,270	£ -		
2022/23	£ 6,032,224	£ 11,905,740	£ 16,939,915	£ 20,213,268		●



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Full Year Target	£22,071,920	●
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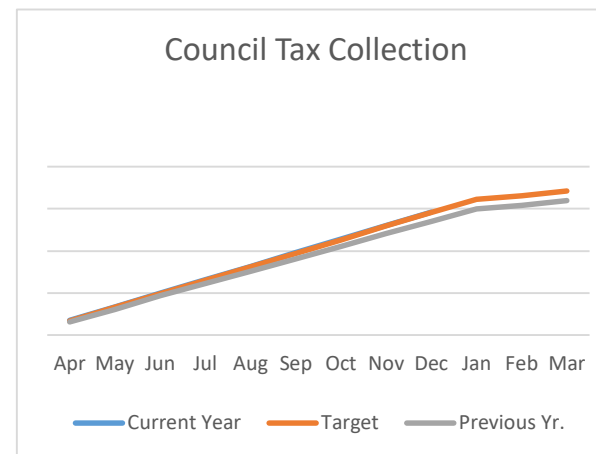
Description
 This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the NNDR Collection Fund against the actual collection.

Narrative
 Collection has exceeded target in the third quarter, however is slightly behind the 2022/23 percentage rate at this time of year. It will be closely monitored in the current economic climate.



Council Tax

Council Tax Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 19,921,293	£ 39,208,716	£ 58,446,507	£ -		●
Target	£ 19,633,224	£ 38,832,184	£ 58,202,677	£ 68,511,010		
Refunds	£ 221,763	£ 466,640	£ 755,941	£ -		
2022/23	£ 18,778,113	£ 36,286,983	£ 54,114,832	£ 63,953,017		●



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Year End Target	£ 68,511,010	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the Council Tax Collection Fund against the actual collection.

Narrative

Collection is above target at the end of Q3 although the difference has narrowed since the end of Q2. Collection is being closely monitored throughout the year in the current economic climate.

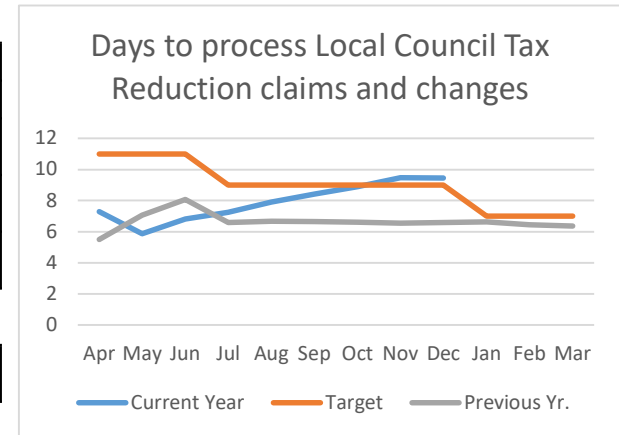


Local Council Tax Reduction



Days to process Local Council Tax Support					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	6.82	8.42	9.46	-	●
Target	11	9	9	7	
2022/23	8.08	6.66	6.61	6.38	●

Year End Target	7	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Council Tax reduction new claims and change of circumstances.

Narrative

The number of days to process Council Tax reduction at the end of Q3 is over the 9 day target by almost half a day. A series of focussed work is planned for January to bring this more up to date with a Partnership wide campaign day planned for the end of January ahead of Annual Billing. A software issue which affected performance during Q2 and 3 has now been resolved.

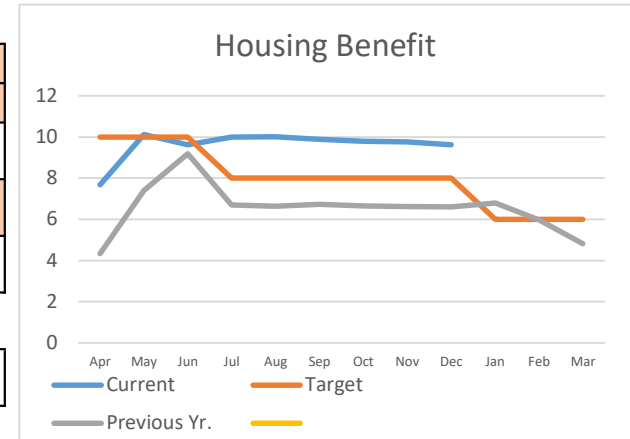


Housing Benefit



Days to process Housing Benefit					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	9.61	9.89	9.62	-	●
Target	10	8	8	6	
2022/23	9.18	6.73	6.61	4.83	●

Year End Target	6	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Housing Benefit new claims and change of circumstances.

Narrative

The number of days to process Housing Benefit in Q3 is above the target of 8 days. Performance has been impacted by the energy schemes which have now closed and a software issue affecting automation of UC records has also impacted resource requirements within Benefits. This has also now been resolved and we aim to meet target by the end of the year and have planned a partnership wide campaign day at the end of January ahead of Annual Billing



Fraud and Compliance



Fraud and Compliance

Following the transfer of Housing Benefit fraud to the DWP on the 1 September 2015, the team continue to be tasked, in accordance with the Business Case approved by Joint Committee, to identify and prevent fraud leading to an increase in Council Tax income in the following areas:

Local Council Tax Support, Single Person Discount, Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates.

The review of newly awarded Single Person Discounts continues to provide positive outcomes.

The team are working with the largest Social Housing provider in the authority to tackle Right to Buy and subletting abuse.

The team continue to seek opportunities to identify dwellings and businesses not registered or having had an undeclared change in use, leading to increased charges – including possible retrospective charges.

Work on the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub has commenced following East Cambs and Fenland approving the business case to extend the Fraud and Compliance work for the two partners. This has aligned the Fraud and Compliance work currently being carried out for other partners of the Anglia Revenues Partnership as indicated in the fraud savings on the quarterly performance report. Funding for 2 additional posts from County has been secured until the end of the financial year and those posts have been filled. Discussions are on going for 2024/25 funding provision.

20

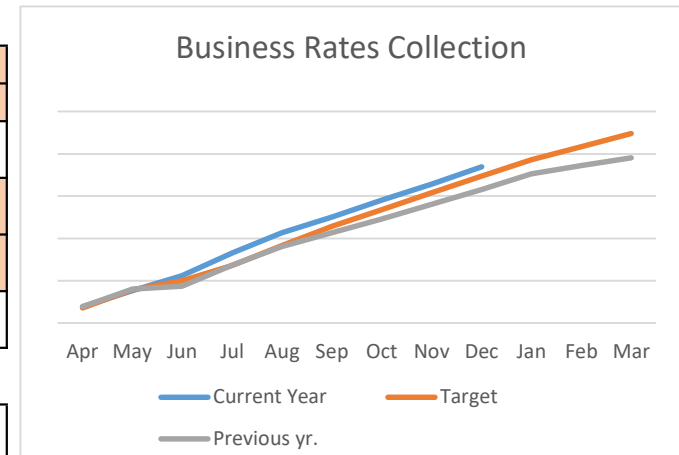
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Single Person Discount Fraud	£49,572	£204,868	£410,421	£0
Local Council Tax Support	£12,185	£21,465	£28,044	£0
Tenancy Fraud	£93,000	£93,000	£93,000	£0
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	£126,108	£147,972	£247,355	£0
Fraud Identified	£280,865	£467,305	£778,820	£0

Performance Information December 2023

Business Rates

Business Rates Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 22,407,281	£ 49,989,647	£ 73,780,586	£ -	●	
Target	£ 19,965,948	£ 45,762,883	£ 69,496,618	£ 89,602,932		
Refunds	£ 1,059,107	£ 1,571,498	£ 2,015,483	£ -		
2022/23	£ 17,431,378	£ 42,658,428	£ 63,154,466	£ 78,033,010	●	

Year End Target	89,602,932	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the NNDR Collection Fund against the actual collection.

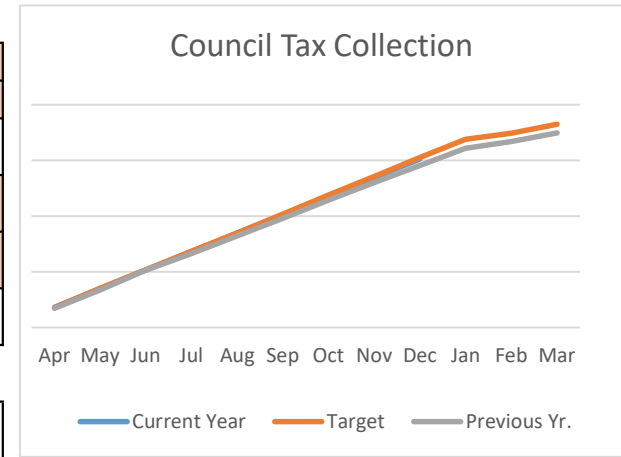
Narrative

Collection has exceeded target in the third quarter but behind the 2022/23 collection percentage at this point in the year. It will be closely monitored in the current economic climate.

Council Tax

Council Tax Collection					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	£ 51,605,854	£ 101,242,912	£ 151,083,155	£ -	●
Target	£ 51,691,556	£ 101,797,118	£ 152,495,778	£ 182,376,077	
Refunds	£ 521,384	£ 1,212,275	£ 1,845,002	£ -	
2022/23	£ 51,262,165	£ 97,920,907	£ 145,561,042	£ 174,705,482	●

Year End Target	182,376,077	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the Council Tax Collection Fund against the actual collection.

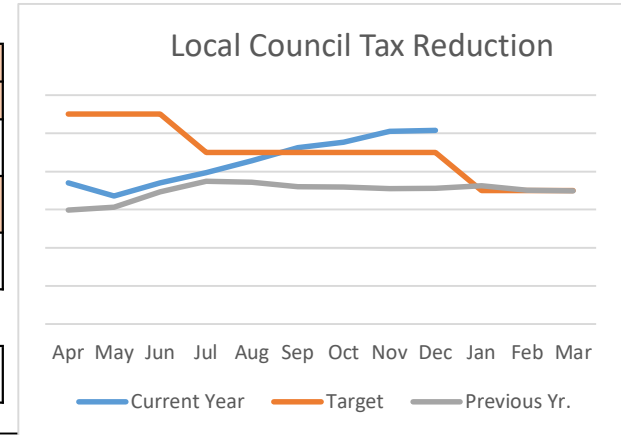
Narrative

Collection is slightly below target at the end of Quarter 3 however remains within 1% of target. The difference between the amount collected and target has increased. Collection is being closely monitored throughout the year in the current economic climate.

Local Council Tax Reduction

Days to process Local Council Tax Support					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	7.41	9.24	10.15	-	●
Target	11	9	9	7	
2022/23	6.93	7.19	7.11	6.98	●

Year End Target	7	●
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23

Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Council Tax reduction new claims and change of circumstances.

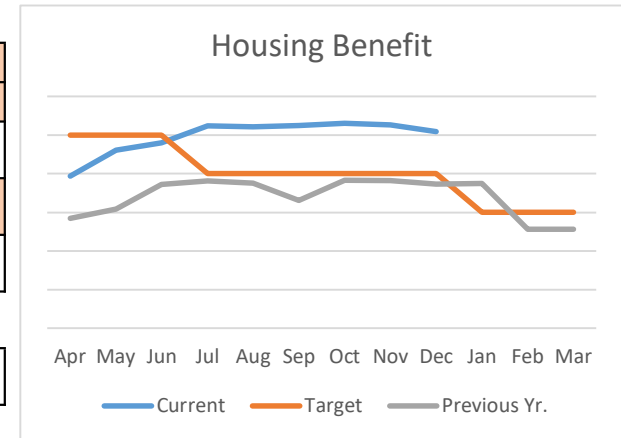
Narrative

The number of days to process Council Tax reduction at the end of Q3 is just over the 9 day target. A series of focussed work is planned for January to bring this more up to date with a Partnership wide campaign day planned for the end of January ahead of Annual Billing. A software issue which affected performance during Q2 and 3 has now been resolved.

Housing Benefit

Days to process Housing Benefit					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	9.61	10.49	10.19	-	●
Target	10	8	8	6	
2022/23	7.44	6.62	7.45	5.13	●

Year End Target	6	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Housing Benefit new claims and change of circumstances.

Narrative

The number of days to process Housing Benefit in Q3 is above the target of 8 days. Performance has been impacted by the energy schemes which have now closed and a software issue affecting automation of UC records has also impacted resource requirements within Benefits. Going forward this has now been resolved, however we are unlikely to meet the target by the end of the year.

Fraud and Compliance

Following the transfer of Housing Benefit fraud to the DWP on the 1 September 2015, the team continue to be tasked, in accordance with the Business Case approved by Joint Committee, to identify and prevent fraud leading to an increase in Council Tax income in the following areas:

Local Council Tax Support, Single Person Discount, Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates.

The reviews of NFI SPD matches and newly awarded Single Person Discounts continue to provide very positive outcomes.

The team work closely with the East Suffolk Corporate Fraud Team and ensure the transfer of fraud referrals across the teams.

The team continue to seek opportunities to identify dwellings and businesses not registered or having had an undeclared change in use, leading to increased charges – including possible retrospective charges.

Work within the NFI SPD review process continues to provide a number of positive outcomes. Suffolk County have agreed to fund a further post in order that the NFI Premium matching service can be utilised for 2023/24. Discussions are ongoing regarding the funding provision for 2024/25.

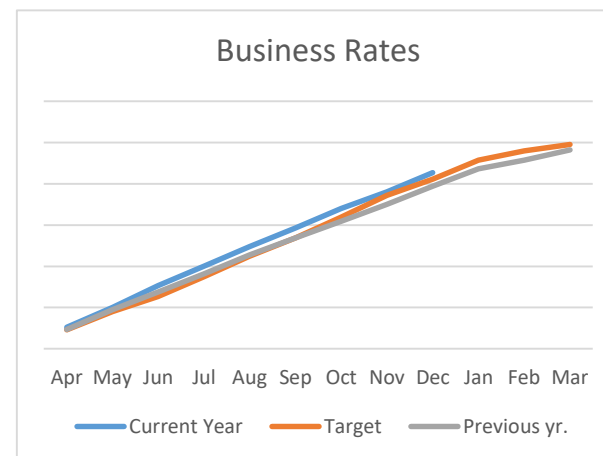
25

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Single Person Discount Fraud	£144,559	£283,689	£380,760	£0
Local Council Tax Support	£6,022	£28,256	£51,063	£0
Tenancy Fraud	£0	£0	£0	£0
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	£1,698	£36,679	£39,542	£0
Fraud Identified	£152,279	£348,624	£471,365	£0

Performance Information December 2023

Business Rates

Business Rates Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 7,636,425	£ 14,640,439	£ 21,345,038	£ -		●
Target	£ 6,328,587	£ 13,437,456	£ 20,572,849	£ 24,779,458		
Refunds	£ 286,004	£ 610,782	£ 1,087,100	£ -		
2022/23	£ 6,886,502	£ 13,413,855	£ 19,699,069	£ 24,120,990		●



26

Year End Target	£24,779,458	●
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Description

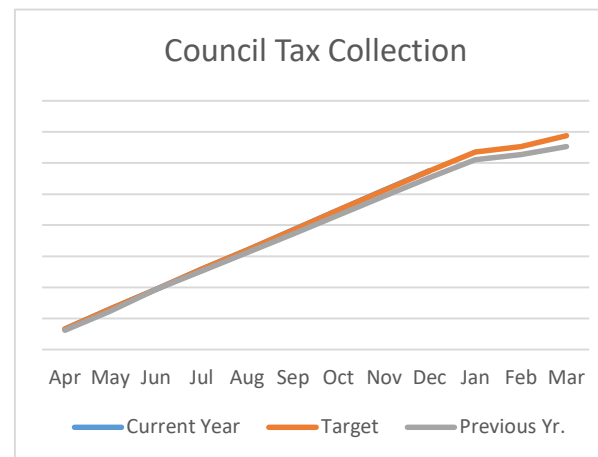
This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the NNDR Collection Fund against the actual collection.

Narrative

Collection has exceeded target in the third quarter, however is slightly behind the in year collection profile. It will be closely monitored in the current economic climate.

Council Tax

Council Tax Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 19,400,484	£ 38,563,439	£ 57,568,740	£ -	●	
Target	£ 19,426,351	£ 38,421,156	£ 57,429,446	£ 68,755,817		
Refunds	£ 220,722	£ 447,331	£ 686,697	£ -		
2022/23	£ 19,437,583	£ 37,186,868	£ 55,231,245	£ 65,262,181	●	



27

Year End Target	£68,755,817	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the Council Tax Collection Fund against the actual collection.

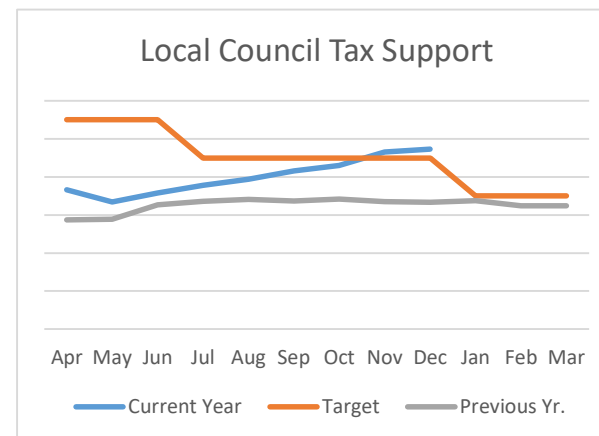
Narrative

Collection is above target at the end of Quarter 3 with an improved position against target compared to Q2. Collection is being closely monitored throughout the year in the current economic climate.

Local Council Tax Reduction

Days to process Local Council Tax Support					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	7.15	8.31	9.45	-	●
Target	11	9	9	7	
2022/23	6.54	6.73	6.67	6.48	●

Year End Target	7	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Council Tax reduction new claims and change of circumstances.

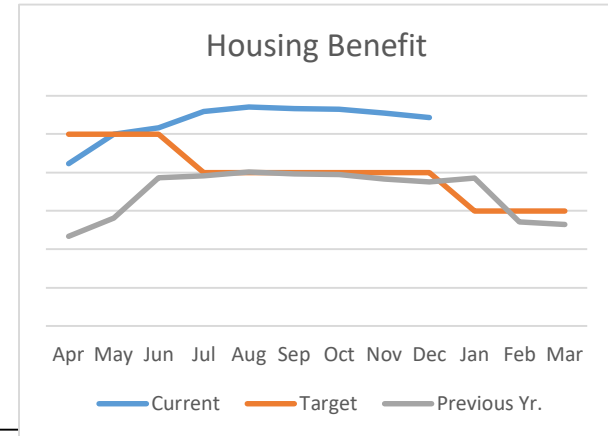
Narrative

The number of days to process Council Tax reduction at the end of Q3 is over the 9 day target by almost half a day. A series of focussed work is planned for January to bring this more up to date with a Partnership wide campaign day planned for the end of January ahead of Annual Billing. A software issue which affected performance during Q2 and 3 has now been resolved.

Housing Benefit

Days to process Housing Benefit					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	10.33	11.33	10.86	-	●
Target	10	8	8	6	
2022/23	7.72	7.93	7.51	5.29	●

Year End Target	6	●
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20

Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Housing Benefit new claims and change of circumstances.

Narrative

The number of days to process Housing Benefit in Q3 is above the target of 8 days. Performance has been impacted by the energy schemes which have now closed and a software issue affecting automation of UC records has also impacted resource requirements within Benefits. Going forward this has now been resolved, however we are unlikely to meet the target by the end of the year.

Fraud and Compliance

Fraud and Compliance

Following the transfer of Housing Benefit fraud to the DWP on the 1 September 2015, the team continue to be tasked, in accordance with the Business Case approved by Joint Committee, to identify and prevent fraud leading to an increase in Council Tax income in the following areas:

Local Council Tax Support, Single Person Discount, Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates.

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The team are working with the largest Social Housing provider in the authority to tackle Right to Buy and subletting abuse.

The team continue to seek opportunities to identify dwellings and businesses not registered or having had an undeclared change in use, leading to increased charges – including possible retrospective charges.

Work on the Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub has commenced following East Camb's and Fenland approving the business case to extend the Fraud and Compliance work for the two partners. This has aligned the Fraud and Compliance work currently being carried out for other partners of the Anglia Revenues Partnership as indicated in the fraud savings on the quarterly performance report. Funding for 2 additional posts from County has been secured for until the end of the financial year and those posts have been filled. Discussions are on going for 2024/25 provision.

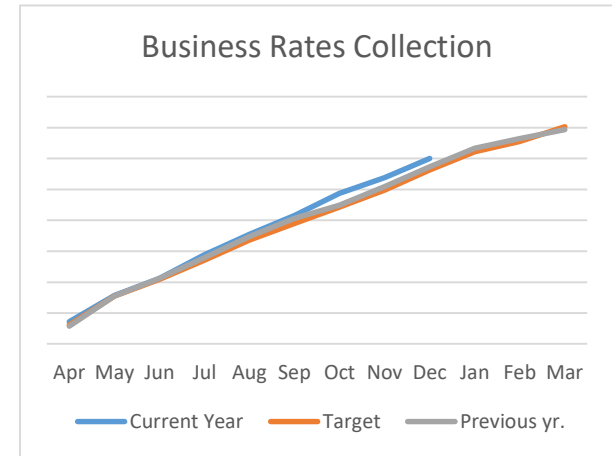
30

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Single Person Discount Fraud	£120,746	£237,996	£411,601	£0
Local Council Tax Support	£16,025	£22,449	£39,575	£0
Tenancy Fraud	£0	£93,000	£93,000	£0
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	£165,378	£169,379	£169,942	£0
Fraud Identified	£302,149	£522,823	£714,118	£0

Business Rates

Business Rates Collection						
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
2023/24	£ 21,120,477	£ 41,555,002	£ 59,989,510	£ -		●
Target	£ 20,791,718	£ 38,889,741	£ 56,228,246	£ 70,292,569		
Refunds	£ 735,836	£ 1,558,348	£ 2,350,262	£ -		
2022/23	£ 21,214,675	£ 40,655,289	£ 57,318,195	£ 69,327,939		●

Year End Target	70,292,569	●
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Description

This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the NNDR Collection Fund against the actual collection.

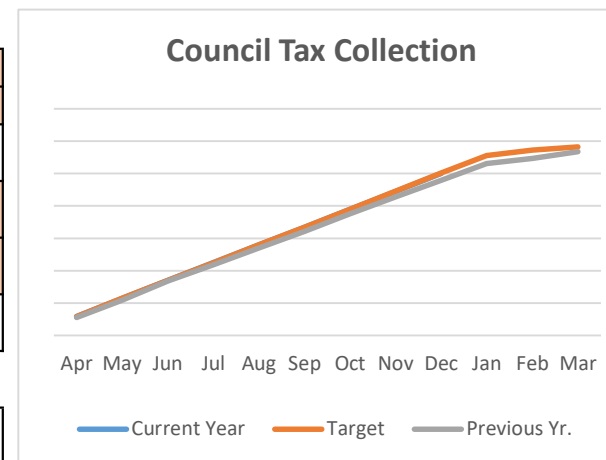
Narrative

Collection has exceeded target in the third quarter and is ahead of the in year collection profile. Collection will be closely monitored in the current economic climate.

Council Tax

Council Tax Collection					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	£ 33,913,141	£ 66,949,957	£ 100,007,975	£ -	●
Target	£ 33,908,764	£ 66,978,837	£ 100,386,716	£ 116,484,934	
Refunds	£ 381,697	£ 805,676	£ 1,213,268	£ -	
2022/23	£ 33,523,653	£ 64,439,738	£ 95,871,308	£ 113,610,278	●

Year End Target	116,484,934	●
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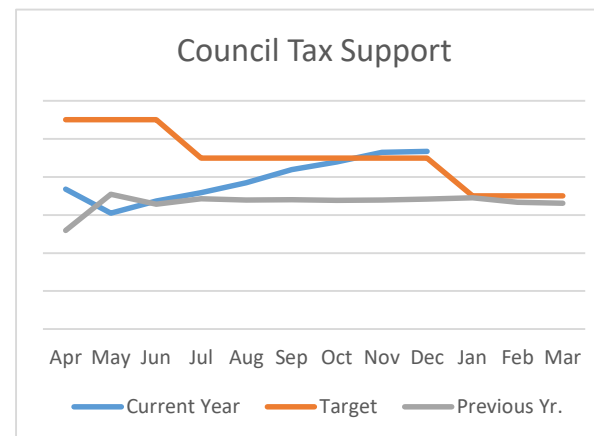
Description
This shows the amount of money required to be collected within the financial year, payable to the Council Tax Collection Fund against the actual collection.

Narrative
Collection is slightly below target at the end of Quarter 3 however remains within 1% of target. The difference between the amount collected and target has increased. Collection is being closely monitored throughout the year in the current economic climate.

Local Council Tax Reduction

Days to process Local Council Tax Support					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	6.74	8.39	9.34	-	●
Target	11	9	9	7	
2022/23	6.56	6.79	6.82	6.61	●

Year End Target	7	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Council Tax reduction new claims and change of circumstances.

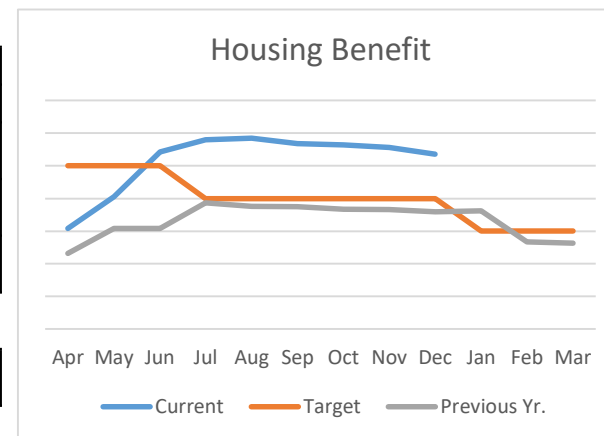
Narrative

The number of days to process Council Tax reduction at the end of Q3 is slightly over the 9 day target. A series of focussed work is planned for January to bring this more up to date with a Partnership wide campaign day planned for the end of January ahead of Annual Billing. A software issue which affected performance during Q2 and 3 has now been resolved.

Housing Benefit

Days to process Housing Benefit					
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
2023/24	10.85	11.36	10.72	-	●
Target	10	8	8	6	
2022/23	6.15	7.49	7.19	5.25	●

Year End Target	6	●
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Description

This indicator measures the average number of days to process Housing Benefit new claims and change of circumstances.

Narrative

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Fraud and Compliance

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The team work closely with the East Suffolk Corporate Fraud Team and ensure the transfer of fraud referrals across the teams.

The team continue to seek opportunities to identify dwellings and businesses not registered or having had an undeclared change in use, leading to increased charges – including possible retrospective charges.

Work within the NFI SPD review process continues to provide a number of positive outcomes. Suffolk County have agreed to fund a further post in order that the NFI Premium matching service can be utilised for 2023/24. Discussions are ongoing regarding funding provision for 2024/25.

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	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Single Person Discount Fraud	£226,167	£387,181	£498,149	£0
Local Council Tax Support	£15,826	£41,361	£56,594	£0
Tenancy Fraud	£186,000	£186,000	£186,000	£0
Other (Council Tax and NDR)	£0	£0	£6,214	£0
Fraud Identified	£427,992	£614,542	£746,957	£0

Service Updates as at December 2023



Enforcement

There has been a higher than usual level of sickness which has had an adverse impact on visits achieved during Q3, however the situation has improved moving into Q4. Ongoing discussions continue with our external partners, Broadland, Norwich and South Norfolk Councils and the East and West Suffolk parking teams regarding the flow of cases. At the end of quarter 3 the team collected just over £3.2 million in debt repayment and fees of £935,834.

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Further Recovery

At the end of Q3 the Further Recovery Team have surpassed the total amount of monies collected in 2022/23.

CTAX	NDR	HBOP	TOTAL
£435,725.32	£679,968.24	3,383.23	£1,119,076.79

Council Tax

Overall collection for council tax in the third quarter is slightly behind target with two authorities being marginally under but within the 1% tolerance; ongoing inflation and interest rate issues might be impacting. A similar picture is being reported by other Suffolk and Norfolk Authorities and the collection rates are being closely monitored throughout the year.

Demand for council tax billing continues at very high levels, in particular the high number of people moving. The amount of outstanding work increased during the first quarter but is now more steady and starting to reduce. This is testament to our project to introduce the generic Council Tax Billing Officer (CTBO) role, which provides a resilient team who have been able to switch between billing and benefits to help cope with ever changing workloads and priorities, providing increased flexibility to the use of our resources, along with maximising automation functionality. We had 8 new CTBOS join in July and are now advertising for a new round of recruitment. Work has continued on the change of address automation project despite the focus on additional Government schemes this year and we continue to work closely with our supplier to further develop the functionality and we are close to extending the volumes we can automate. We have also had great success in the automation of web Direct Debits and finished testing refund automation at the end of December.

At the end of December 2022 the Government announced a new £100m Council Tax Support Fund to help economically vulnerable residents with their Council Tax Bills. The majority of allocations were applied directly to 2023-24 Council Tax bills during annual billing, with the remaining funds being used to provide additional support to new Council Tax Reduction claimants throughout the 2023-24 year and additional exceptional hardship funds for vulnerable council tax payers.

Benefits

Neither Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support Q3 targets have been met for Q3. We have held focus days to bring Housing Benefit new claims up to date and are planning to do the same with Council Tax Support claims in January. We have also been working on some new automation areas to improve performance and to further smooth the customer experience.

We continue to see increases in demand from the continuing high levels of changes of addresses and continue to utilise generically trained staff to focus resource where it is most needed. We have beta tested and implemented Capita's fraud prevention automation functionality and helped develop an online solution for accuracy reviews.

We are now automating 97% of changes in UC and have become a reference site for other supplier sites. but a system bug affected our performance in this area during Q2 and Q3. The two government Energy Bills Support Scheme (Alternative Funding) have now closed and the second allocation of new burdens is due in January. 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 HB claims that are due to migrate to UC. The Government will announce a full UC roll out plan for the remaining legacy benefits including Housing Benefit in the new year.

Non-Domestic Rates

The overall collection and for each individual authority is above target at the end of the third quarter. This will be closely monitored in the current economic climate.

A new NDR Valuation List came into effect on the 1 April 2023, every property was assigned a property value. For the team it means that they are administering changes to the 2017 and 2023 VOA property lists - apart from a handful of appeals the 2010 list is now closed.

Recovery Cycles successfully continue across all partners.

The review of Small Business Rate reviews was completed in Q3 meeting the internal audit deadline.

The Team had 1 part time vacancy at the end of Q3 which is being recruited.

Administration of the 4 BIDs throughout the partnership and 3 Enterprise Zones continues.

ARP Systems and Digital

Work is progressing with our supplier to review their Digital product working with other LA's to provide feedback from a wider group of users.

We are working with a large Unitary Council where we are sharing our knowledge and experiences, this will be beneficial for ARP in the future.

Work volumes with both System admin and EDMS have been quite high, but through working with the Programme Manager we are making a strong plan of priorities so we can ensure that resources can meet expectations and demands. All ongoing projects have been scored in line with strategic priorities and regular project updates are provided for each team.

We are now successfully automating web DDs and have now completed testing of refunds for Direct Debit payers. Both of which will complement move automation which we hope to see progress during Q4 following some system enhancements and fixes. Work to amend the system start date has now been completed for all 3 Councils for Council Tax and NNDR as planned. A new improved Contact us form with the option of uploading evidence has been launched and we are seeing increased use of this month on month. We are working on PDF attachment e-bills ahead of annual billing and plan a partnership wide campaign to increase take up in the new financial year.

Fraud and Compliance

The Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub became operational in Quarter 1, with encouraging early results in Q3. Norfolk County Council continue to fund one Council Tax compliance Officer to continue Single Person Discount reviews for Norwich City Council and any additional work identified through the Norfolk Fraud Hub. Funding from Norfolk County Council has now been secured for two years from April 2022, including funding of the Norwich post plus an additional post to utilise the premium matching service for Breckland and Norwich. Suffolk County Council have also approved an increase in funding from April 2022 for a period of two years. This funding includes the premium matching service for both East and West Suffolk, providing funding for an additional post within the team.

Fraud work commenced for Broadland and South Norfolk in Quarter 2 although this was hindered by their change in software supplier. We received notification that Lincolnshire County Council has withdrawn funding for ARP to undertake their Single Person Discounts 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 in East and West Suffolk with further results due in January.

Better Customer Experience Programme

The new contact us form helps enhance the customer experience by capturing all required information including evidence within the one form.

Automating Council Tax moves is an ongoing project which is starting to see massive benefits to automation and back-end processing. We are live with 2 move types ahead of annual billing; the next move types will be incoming tenants and tenant vacating. Further work will then be carried out to look at new properties in the hope we can find a quicker way for these to be set up. Current automation is around 22% but we expect this to rise when we widen the scope of automation types.

Telsolutions is an innovative way of contacting our residents and sending reminders without producing paper. Over the past 6 months the number of printed reminders has reduced by over 50%. This has reduced postage and printing whilst improving collection.

Work is ongoing to look at sending e-bills as a PDF attachment via email to help increase take up and avoid the rise in contact around annual billing time due to password resets and other online portal issues. This will tie into our wider strategic aim of moving people to a more automated service with direct debit and eBilling.

Our telephony project has led to a thorough review of our call scripts and the options available for customers and the new system is now live. We have made improvements to our call flow and scripts to help ensure the customer is routed to the right place more efficiently, whilst ensuring the right support is provided.

BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Alison Chubbock, Assistant Director Finance
To: ARP Joint Committee, 5 March 2024
Author: Alison Chubbock, Assistant Director Finance
Subject: ARP Forecast Financial Performance 2023-2024
Purpose: To provide information on the forecast full year financial position against budget for the ARP

Recommendation(s):

- 1) That the report and appendix be noted.

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 Each of the partner Councils provides forecast full year financial information against budget for the ARP. The information is collated to provide an overall financial performance report, to provide information to Joint Committee on the progress against budget. This report is based on information as at 31 December 2023 and all costs are included and shared based on the Partnership agreement.

1.2 The forecast shows an overspend against budget of £186k (1.8%) for the whole of the ARP and this is shown further in Appendix A along with details of the variances.

The main reason for the overspend is the national pay award, which is higher than the original budget estimates. Alongside a significant increase in Royal Mail postage charges which took effect from October and reduced income from the Enforcement service.

We have received Government *New Burdens* funding to help offset the costs incurred for delivering the two alternative energy funding schemes which has increased income in this year.

The budget for 2023-24 includes an efficiency target of £100k, rising to £200k in future years. The £100k for 2023-24 has been achieved and is included in the forecast in this report. Work will continue through the year to meet the higher target in future years and is currently on track.

1.3 Appendix A also provides details on the remaining transformation funding which was set aside in previous years from below budget spend and grant funding. £52k is earmarked for projects in progress and there is a further £64k 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.

1.4 The table below shows the share of the forecast outturn for each partner based on the ARP Joint Committee agreement, and this will change for the final values at the end of March 2024.

	Forecast Out-turn
Breckland	£20,291
East Cambs	£17,034
East Suffolk	£76,287
Fenland	£36,641
West Suffolk	£35,578
TOTAL	£185,831

2.0 OPTIONS

2.1 That the report and appendices are noted.

3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

3.1 To provide Members information on the financial position against budget for the whole of the ARP.

4.0 EXPECTED BENEFITS

4.1 To provide Members information on the financial position against budget for the whole of the ARP.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

In preparing this report, the report author has considered the likely implications of the decision - particularly in terms of Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues; Constitutional & Legal; Contracts; Corporate Priorities; Crime & Disorder; Equality & Diversity/Human Rights; Financial; Health & Wellbeing; Reputation; Risk Management; Safeguarding; Staffing; Stakeholders/Consultation/Timescales; Transformation Programme; Other. Where the report author considers that there may be implications under one or more of these headings, these are identified below.

5.2 Financial

5.2.1 This report is financial in nature and financial information is included within the report and appendices.

5.2 Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales

5.12.1 Accountants at the partner Councils have been consulted on their financial forecasts.

6.0 WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

6.1 N/A

7.0 ACRONYMS

7.1 ARP – Anglia Revenues Partnership

7.2 JC – Joint Committee

Background papers:- [See The Committee Report Guide for guidance on how to complete this section](#)

Lead Contact Officer

Name and Post: Alison Chubbock, Assistant Director Finance
Telephone Number: 07967 325037
Email: alison.chubbock@breckland.gov.uk

Key Decision: No

Exempt Decision: No

This report refers to a Mandatory & Discretionary Services

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix A Financial performance report

Anglia Revenues Partnership Joint Committee

Forecast Full Year Financial Performance as at 31/12/23

Description	Approved Budget	Forecast Actuals	Forecast Variance	Variance	Notes
	203/24	2023/24	Over/(Under)		
	£	£	£	%	
Employee Related Costs	10,679,482	10,810,960	131,478	1.23	1
Premises Related Costs	185,902	119,225	(66,677)	(35.87)	2
Transport Related Costs	86,767	86,721	(46)	(0.05)	
Supplies & Services	1,994,525	2,035,342	40,817	2.05	3
Support Services	485,515	476,646	(8,869)	(1.83)	
Income	(2,850,043)	(2,760,916)	89,127	(3.13)	4
TOTAL PARTNERSHIP COSTS	10,582,147	10,767,978	185,831	1.76	5

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Variance Notes

1. The overspend is due to cost pressures from the national pay award being higher than budgeted.
2. The underspend is mainly due to lower business rates for 2023/24 compared to budget
3. Supplies and services forecast outturn includes the 18% increase in Royal Mail costs wef October 2023.
4. The overspend is due to reduced income from Enforcement resulting from a combination of less cases coming through and the impact of sickness within the team. The position will continue to be monitored closely
5. The outturn position includes funding for the administration of the two energy support grants.

Transformation funding - committed expenditure as follows:

Description	Approved Budget 2023/24 £	Forecast Actuals 2024/25 £	Forecast Actuals 2025/26 £
Already committed from grant funding received in previous years			
Call management replacement (Teams)	20,000	0	0
Work to identify unrated properties (estimated value)	25,000	0	0
Set up costs for virtual post room	7,000		
Total	52,000	0	0
Unallocated	63,574	0	0
Grand Total	115,574	0	0

Call Management replacement £20k has been spent, with a further investment of approximately £25k anticipated to identify unrated properties. OIB in December approved £7k to be used for set up costs of a virtual post room to generate future savings. It is expected that the budget will be spent by the end of the year. If all of the identified expenditure goes through in 2023/24 there will be £64k remaining for future projects.

ICT Reserve	Approved Budget 2023/24 £	Approved Budget 2024/25 £	Approved Budget 2025/26 £
Opening Balance	(35,000)	(47,500)	(50,000)
Partnership contribution	(72,500)	(72,500)	(72,500)
Earmarked - ICT refresh replacement servers software element	60,000	70,000	90,000
	(47,500)	(50,000)	(32,500)

ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP

Report of Lorraine King – ARP Head of Benefits, Council Tax Billing & Systems
To: Joint Committee, 5 March 2024
Subject: Welfare Reform
Purpose: To provide an update on welfare reform

Recommendation(s):

- That the Joint Committee note the report.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Welfare Reform was introduced by Government in 2012 as part of wider fiscal measures to reduce deficits, with the intention to encourage work whilst reducing welfare expenditure. This report contains the latest updates on welfare reform and builds on previous reports to Joint Committee.

2.0 Matters of interest

2.1 Universal Credit – situation to date – update at 2.1.14, 2.1.15 (v-x) and 2.3.7.

2.1.1 Universal Support

2.1.2 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) established Universal Support to help people to claim Universal Credit and budgeting support to help customers to manage their payments.

2.1.3 Since the introduction of Universal Credit, the DWP has funded Local Authorities to provide these services, who in turn have been free to do so either directly or through commissioning arrangements. The ARP partner Councils provided direct help to claim within their Customer Services teams, with all bar one of the Councils funding Citizen’s Advice to provide budgeting support.

2.1.4 In April 2019 changed their strategy, awarding a 12-month contract, subsequently extended to the 2021-2022 year, to Citizens Advice (CAB) to provide these services. CAB nationally have, through their various CAB networks throughout Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk, established the following arrangements locally:

- Advisors dial into a national call centre
- Web chat
- Face to face arrangements – some on an appointment basis, others on a drop in basis or a mixture of the two. Rural provision can be patchy

2.1.5 Concerns have been raised that CAB are only funded to help to the first payment. Given DWP’s processing figures show approximately 80% of claims are paid on time (at five weeks) and given that the Housing Element (for rent) is typically the cause of delay, concerns have been expressed that vulnerable people may be affected and at risk of falling into rent arrears and subsequent consequences. CAB have said they will continue to help such customers, drawing on their usual funding streams.

- 2.1.6** The partner Customer Services teams continue to help customers to claim, which may include signposting to CAB.
- 2.1.7** ARP continues to monitor the position and through meetings with the LGA and DWP, will continue to raise issues and concerns.
- 2.1.8** DWP are yet to publish a review of the CAB Help to Claim service but have confirmed the CAB arrangement will continue into the 2021-2022 year, with a review underway for provision from 2022.
- 2.1.9** DWP recently requested expressions of interest from public, private, and voluntary sectors to deliver a digital and telephony help to claim service from April 2022, stating DWP will take responsibility for face-to-face assistance. An expression of interest was made.
- 2.1.10** The Customer Services Team, comprising of partner Heads of Customer Service, support the ARP view that the best fit for our 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.
- 2.1.11** At Joint Committee 22nd June 2021 Members requested a briefing note to assist with any discussions with their MPs, subsequently issued.
- 2.1.12** DWP have commenced a formal process to requests bids for a digital and telephony service, intending to award contract from April 2022 for one year.
- 2.1.13** It was announced at the end of January 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.
- 2.1.14** The Minister of State for Employment announced on 20th March 2023 that the Help to Claim scheme would be extended for another year to 31st March 2024. The department is currently considering the support provision from April 2024 through a bid process. The outcome of the competition was due in December 2023 but at the time of writing this report this has not yet been published.
- 2.1.15 Summary of the current position on the expansion of Universal Credit**
- a) Due to redeploying staff to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, DWP pulled the Harrogate pilot of managed migration of existing cases in Spring 2020. DWP now plan to recommence the pilot this year and report to Parliament with the aim of completing migration by 2024. DWP have not released any further detail or indicative timetable at this stage.
 - b) DWP are launching a UC awareness campaign to encourage voluntary migration as numbers are very low and not meeting UC business case volumes or costings. Difficulty presents that voluntary customer will not receive the transitional protection afforded to managed customers – DWP itself estimates 30-50% will be worse off at the point of transfer, with Ministers advocating caution when advising customers.
 - c) As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Universal Credit rates were temporarily increased by £20 per week for the 2020-2021 year and extended in the budget. This ended on 06th October, and we have received change files for all UC recipients. Due to the recent improvements to automation, we have been able to automate around 96% of these changes seamlessly, requiring no intervention from the team, whilst other Councils are struggling to cope with the increase in manual assessments. It should be noted all the partner Local Council Tax Support schemes provided for customers to receive the full benefit of that uplift.
 - d) The Chancellor announced at the 2021 Budget that by 1st December the taper for UC will be reduced from 63p to 55p per pound to help plug the gap left by the removal of

the uplift which affected 4.4 million households nationally. This change is expected to benefit around 1.9m families.

- e) The UC work allowance will also increase by £500 per year from the same date and a new target of March 2025 was set for the rollout of UC to be complete, and for the introduction of a pension age housing costs scheme.
- f) Ministers announced in December 2021 that they would resume the managed migration process at some point during 2022, but it is felt that any movement this year will be very slow with rollout accelerating through 2023-24.
- g) DWP announced in April 2022 that they intend to move all working age customers to UC by the end of 2024. The scheme will now be called 'Move to UC' rather than managed migration.
- h) Lessons learned from the limited cases involved in Harrogate trial indicated that warm up conversations did not work and that aligning payment cycles is important.
- i) In May 2022 DWP announced that the first two trial sites are Bolton and Medway. During the trial there will be more focus on customers moving over independently and a test and learn approach will continue. At the time of writing this report we understand 500 claimants will be written to and given 3 months to make a claim for Universal Credit.
- j) Melton and Bolton trial 3-month deadline ran into second week of August with 1-month extensions given. A further 250 letters were issued in July trialling a different approach and expanded into Cornwall at the same time where 250 letters were issued to trial a new demographic. Harrow has now joined the pilot as well as Northumberland. CEOs should be contacted 4-6 weeks prior to any involvement in their area.
- k) In the Autumn budget in November 2022, it was announced that plans to continue to move across 2.5 m cases on to UC will continue but the move of a further 1 m ESA customers will be delayed until 2028. The plan to consider movement of Pensioners on to a Housing Element was also delayed from 2025 to 2028-29.
- l) It was also announced that mortgage support through UC will be reviewed.
- m) In January 2023 a report was issued providing analysis on the initial 499 move to UC cases. Of the 499, 423 transitioned, with 50% being awarded Transitional Protection, 63 applied by phone and 7 cases are yet to make a claim. The migration data will help inform the next stages of migration.
- n) In April 2023 5000 migration letters were sent to Tax Credit claimants asking them to claim UC as the move to UC expands.
- o) At the end of April 2023 East Suffolk, Fenland and West Suffolk CEOs received notification that DWP will start to issue migration notices to households claiming tax credits only in July 2023. This does not include households in receipt of HB and tax credits. Migration of HB cases will take place during 2024-25.
- p) The tax credit only cases could also be claiming CTRS and a partly automated process is already in place to re-assess these cases as they move across to UC.
- q) The estimated number of CTRS claimants in receipt of tax credits only in East Suffolk, Fenland and West Suffolk is less than 100 cases.
- r) At the end of July we were made aware that Breckland and East Cambridgeshire are also in the July 2023 tranche and tax credit only cases will now start migrating for all 5 partners.
- s) The expansion of Move to UC continues with Southeast Wales and Central Scotland in October and bringing Southwest Scotland on board in November.
- t) In September, a small-scale discovery phase started bringing more combinations of benefits into Manchester with Harrow and Northumberland starting in October.
- u) A stakeholder event has recently taken place to discuss Move to UC barriers and how they can be overcome.
- v) A plan for the 2024-25 migration has been decided, starting with Income Support case followed by ESA with tax credits then Jobseekers. Housing Benefits only and Housing benefit with tax credits will follow in next April.
- w) More detail of the roll out plan, including national estimated cases affected is due early 2024 along with guidance on the journey and an all LA conference call will take place on 15th March 2024.
- x) Work is underway to determine new burdens funding to support the closure of HB claims.
- y) We continue to press for more information and timelines at our regular DWP & LGA liaison meetings and await further updates on the ongoing roll out programme.

2.2 At a national level the following concerns have been raised:

- How DWP will monitor and report Citizen's Advice performance delivering Universal Support
- The lack of Managed Migration detailed plans and schedule
- Failure to take advantage of existing data to prepopulate UC systems with legacy systems data – all existing customers including Housing Benefit will be expected to make a new claim. DWP say they cannot 'lift and shift' existing known data held on their systems to the UC system. I have challenged that as a missed opportunity to smooth the customer migration journey.
- Concerns the Managed Migration process will leave customers without benefit during the transfer - DWP adopting a 'who knows me approach'
- The five weeks wait for UC payments – rent element often lags behind
- Alternative Payment Arrangements and data share for Private Landlords
- Housing Benefit Debt
- LA funding
- Management Information including LA access to UC Information

2.3 Discretionary Housing Payments – no new matters arising

2.3.1 Discretionary Housing Payment grant is funded by DWP, designed to help customers remain in their homes or to move to affordable and sustainable accommodation. For the 2020-2021 year DWP increased funding to offset the impact of private sector rents increasing above the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates used to calculate Housing Benefit.

2.3.2 However, funding for 2021-2022 has returned to 2019-2020 levels, despite concerns the pandemic will increase demand throughout this year. We 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.

2.3.3 Funding for 2021-2022 was allocated in two parts with £100m at the start of the year and £40m at mid-year. We received the second allocation in September.

2.3.4 Funding for 2022-2023 is being allocated in two allocations with national funding of £100m in April and £2m mid-year, a reduction of £38m overall (27%). We are working closely with Housing teams and other stakeholders to devise a process to help us manage the reduced budget to assist customers with shortfalls in their rent.

2.3.5 Residual Discretionary Council Tax rebate funding has been used to provide additional targeted support to those who have successfully applied for DHP this financial year with payments of between £100-£200 being issued ahead of the scheme closure on 30th November 2022.

2.3.6 DWP retained the current methodology for DHP allocations, with a 2-year funding freeze and allocations to be paid in one upfront payment. This is to retain consistency and help Local Authorities plan. A short consultancy took place prior to allocations being made in February.

2.3.7 DHP allocations for FYE March 2025 remain the same as the previous 2 years as part of the 2 year funding freeze.

2.4 Benefit Cap – no new matters arising

2.4.1 DWP introduced the reduced Benefit Cap on the 7th November 2016; the maximum family income before the Benefit Cap applies will rise from £20,000 to £22,020 and for single adults with no children from £13,400 to £14,753 from April 2023.

2.4.2 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.

2.4.3 It was announced in the Autumn statement in November 2022 that the benefit cap would rise by 10.1% in line with CPI from April 2023. This will mean 60k households will no longer be capped, 130k will receive more support and 30k will be out of the scope of the cap.

2.5 Social rented sector rent restrictions – no new matters arising

2.5.1 In August 2020 Government responded to consultation on funding for supported housing, dropping 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 Housing Benefit and will not move to Universal Credit.

3.0 Welfare Benefit Uprating April 2024 – no new matters arising

3.1 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 2022/23 the State Pension will rise in line with the highest of inflation or 2.5%, with CPI for September (3.1%) historically being the figure used.

3.2 It was announced in the Autumn statement in November 2023 that the state pension will rise by **8.5%** from April 2024 under the 'triple lock' guarantee, meaning millions of people will receive a weekly increase of up to £17.35. Certain benefits, including Universal Credit, will also rise by 6.7%.

4.0 Homes for Ukraine's scheme – no new matters arising

4.1 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.

4.2 The same disregards are also covered in the prescribed CTRS scheme for pensioners, and we have provisions in all the partners Local Council Tax Support schemes for working age customers to disregard such payments.

5.0 Options

5.1 The report is for information purposes

6.0 Reasons for recommendations

6.1 The report is for information only

7.0 IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Risk

The report is for information only

6.2 Financial

The report is for information only

6.3 Legal

The report is for information only

6.4 Equality and Diversity

Not applicable.

Background papers: - None

Lead Contact Officer

Name/Post: Lorraine King (ARP Head of Benefits, Council Tax Billing & Systems)

Email: Lorraine.king@angliarevenues.gov.uk