

Agenda Item No:	8	
Committee:	Overview and Scrutiny	
Date:	26 June 2023	
Report Title:	Anglian Revenues Partnership (ARP) Update	

1 Purpose / Summary

To update Overview and Scrutiny on performance of the Council's Revenues and Benefits service since it became part of ARP on 1 April 2014.

2 Key issues

- At Council on 19 December 2013, Members endorsed the Council's approach to Service Transformation including the way forward in respect of Shared Services. This meeting approved that the Council's Revenues and Benefits service join ARP as of 1 April 2014.
- The table below shows that Fenland's contribution up to 2022/23 has been lower than it was when joining the partnership in April 2014 but increases for 2023/24 due to the 2022 pay award being above budget and inflationary pressures; the increase has been contained at 5.5% when inflation at budget setting was double that value.

ARP Partner Budgeted Contributions from 2014 to 2023					
By Partner	2014/15	2016/17	2018/19	2022/23	2023/24
Breckland	1,960,573	1,930,732	1,822,280	1,940,820	2,066,134
East Cambs	1,143,817	1,129,429	1,043,406	1,091,147	1,174,235
East Suffolk	2,975,533	2,970,894	2,690,957	3,240,696	3,427,881
Fenland	1,306,332	1,203,425	1,120,962	1,299,569	1,389,977
West Suffolk	2,413,053	2,339,784	2,209,892	2,335,817	2,523,919
	9,799,308	9,574,264	8,887,497	9,908,049	10,582,146

- At Council on the 6 November 2014, Members approved the introduction of an in-house ARP Enforcement Agency Service (previously called Bailiffs). The service is being run by ARP to ensure that customers are treated fairly and are not overcharged fees.
 - As full members of the ARP, the Council has joint control over its governance and direction, with a Member (the Deputy Leader) sitting on the Joint Committee together with Members from the other four main partner Councils.
 - Joining ARP demonstrates the Council's open-minded approach to shared services. Discussions will continue in other areas where a robust business case can be developed which delivers savings and maintains a high quality service to residents and local businesses.
- Recommendations

That Overview and Scrutiny are requested to:

- Note the attached report.

Wards Affected	All
Forward Plan Reference	N/A
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Chris Boden – Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance Councillor Mrs Jan French – Deputy Leader
Report Originator(s)	Adrian Mills, Head of Anglia Revenues Partnership Email: Adrian.mills@angliarevenues.gov.uk Tel: 07984 255437
Contact Officer(s)	Adrian Mills, Head of Anglia Revenues Partnership Email: adrian.mills@angliarevenues.gov.uk Tel: 07984 255437 Sam Anthony, Head of HR & OD Email: santhony@fenland.gov.uk Tel: 01354 622268 Peter Catchpole, Corporate Director Email: petercatchpole@fenland.gov.uk Tel: 01354 622201
Background Paper(s)	None

1 Background

- 1.1 ARP is a shared Revenues and Benefits service that from April 2014 comprised five partner authorities (Breckland, East Cambs, Fenland, Forest Heath, and St Edmundsbury). From April 2015 Waveney and Suffolk Coastal also became full members of the ARP.
- 1.2 In April 2019 Waveney and Suffolk Coastal merged to become East Suffolk Council and St. Edmundsbury and Forest Heath merged to become West Suffolk Council
- 1.3 The ARP continues to be the largest provider of Revenues and Benefits in terms of the number of partner Councils and has the 3rd largest caseload in England as shown below:

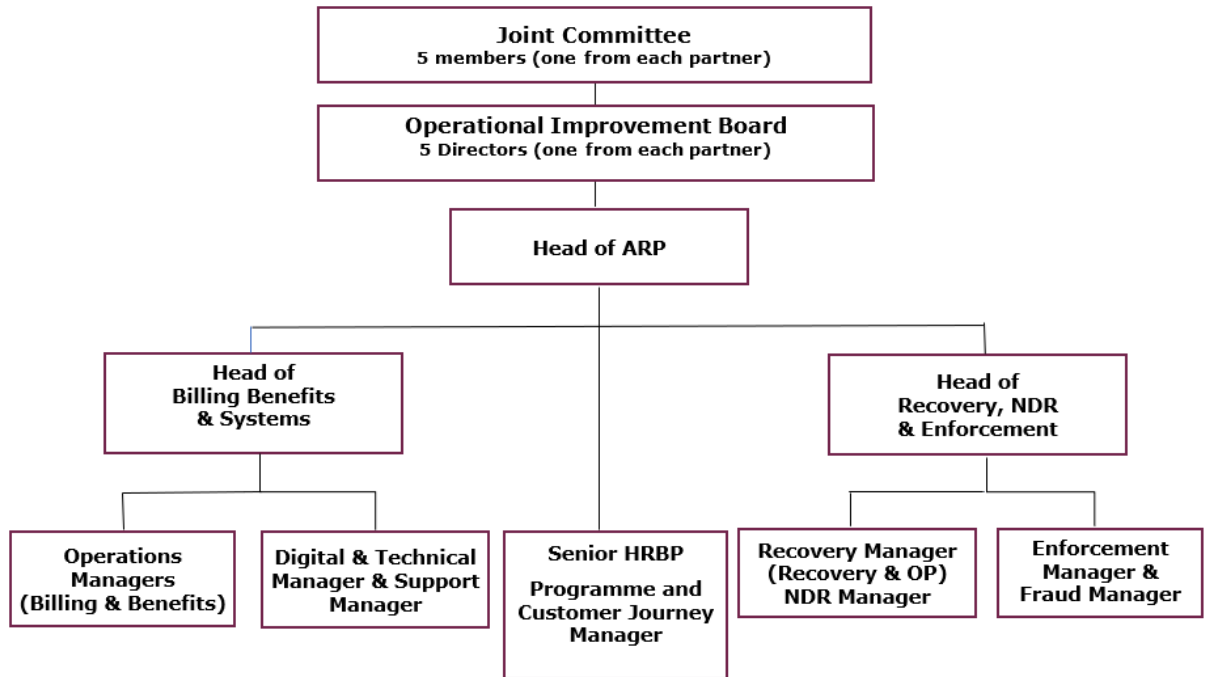
	Council Tax ¹	Housing Benefit ²	Business Rates ³	Total
Birmingham	455,110	67,571	47,910	570,591
Leeds	366,170	31,758	31,590	429,518
Anglia Revenues Partnership	352,730	21,932	29,976	404,638
Cornwall	278,470	21,319	36,350	336,139
Sheffield	257,530	25,913	19,000	302,443
Manchester	243,890	30,631	27,420	301,941
County Durham	251,100	23,807	16,180	291,087
Liverpool	236,281	32,963	20,380	289,624
Bradford	220,710	19,024	19,760	259,494

(1) Valuation Office Agency, table CTSOP1.0_SUPP (March 2022)

(2) Dept for Work and Pensions, Housing Benefit caseload by LA (Feb 2023)

(3) DLUHC, NNDR15 hereditaments data (2022-23)

- 1.4 ARP operates a Joint Committee to facilitate the delivery of the Revenues and Benefits service for each of the five full member authorities of ARP, which is delegated through Section 101 (5) of the Local Government Act 1972 and regulations made under section 20 of the Local Government Act 2000. At its meeting on 27 February 2014, Council resolved to agree to the arrangement above.
- 1.5 The arrangements outlined in section 1.4 above mean that the Joint Committee is enabled by legislation to make decisions on behalf of all the Councils that are part of ARP with regards Revenues and Benefits service provision.
- 1.6 The Council is represented at Joint Committee by the Deputy Leader, the current Chair. The five Members, one from each Council, who form the Joint Committee, have met at Breckland House in Thetford four times annually, with the annual meeting in June. From 2022 Joint Committee agreed to hold two meetings virtually where programmed business does not require a decision, reserving face to face arrangements should business require a decision to be made. Meetings have been attended by Fenland Members since the 30 June 2014. Member engagement has been enhanced in 2022 by the introduction of informal Joint Committee meetings preceding each formal Joint Committee meeting.

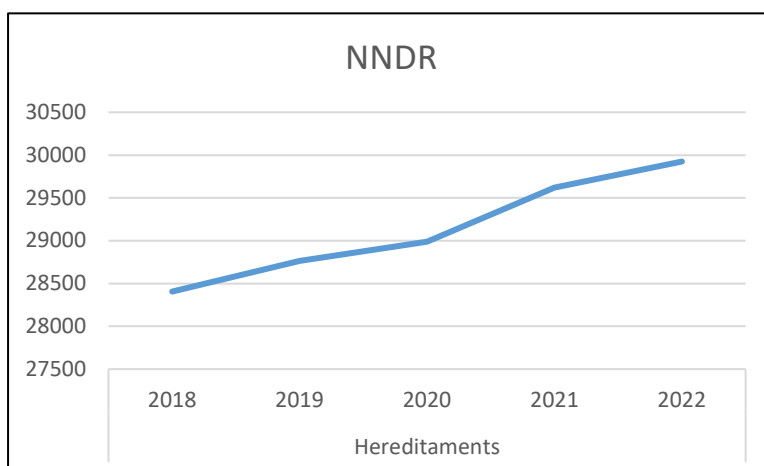
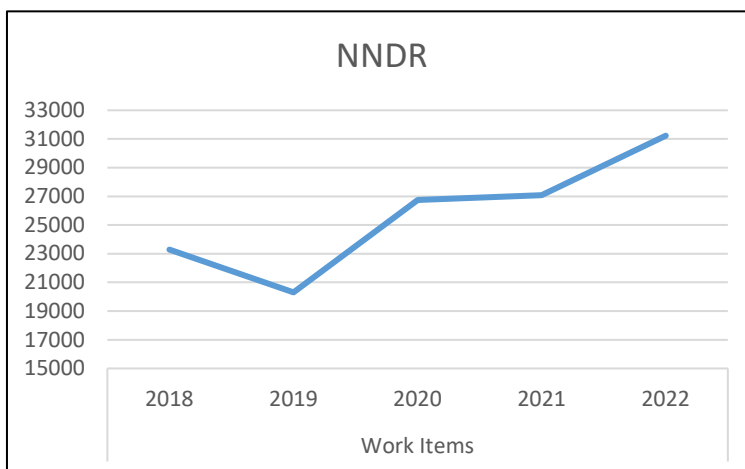


- 1.7 The ARP Enforcement Agency Service has been active since the end of July 2015 collecting over £25 Million in respect of Council Tax and Business Rates arrears, of which over £3.4 Million has been for Fenland.
- 1.8 The Enforcement team is working much more closely with the Council Tax teams more than the external providers were able to. We are better able to respond in cases where vulnerable people are involved to help those people who are genuinely having difficulty in paying and where appropriate the team can withdraw statutory fees and extend recovery into a new financial year.
- 1.9 In 2017 South Norfolk District Council, and in 2019 Norwich City Council, delegated their Enforcement work to Breckland Council and so their cases are also dealt with through the ARP Enforcement team, although Norwich City Council cases have ceased as they develop their enforcement approach. We have been in regular conversations with Norwich, who at the time of writing, appear to be developing an enforcement strategy which should see cases being sent to us again.
- 1.10 In July 2022 Broadland District Council also delegated their Enforcement work to Breckland Council. This followed an options appraisal by South Norfolk and Broadland, both working in partnership, concluding in their decision to place Broadland Enforcement work into the ARP and to retain South Norfolk enforcement with ARP.
- 1.11 From April 2021 East and West Suffolk have passed cases for parking enforcement to the ARP enforcement team. This has increased the fee income shared by partners, however the volume of cases received is below forecast, partly due to changing parking habits post Covid. We continue to be in discussions with the car parking teams as we monitor the position and financial impact.
- 1.12 ARP represented the first major shared service initiative for the Council. Following a robust Business Case, it is delivering significant financial savings, whilst at the same time maintaining the high standards of performance and customer service that underpin Council services.

2 Revenues and Benefits performance

2.1 Business Rates

- 2.2 The implementation of the CARF (Covid Additional Relief Fund) Relief in 2022/2023 placed a significant burden upon the team. This was a discretionary relief announced in the Autumn Statement in 2021. Fenland in conjunction with ARP devised a Discretionary Policy and allocated all the £1.6 million fund to local business before the September 2022 deadline. This created considerable amount of extra work, the resultant Business Rate refunds were only finished in December. The additional work of dealing with applications, associated correspondence and resultant refunds was carried within the existing team. Government provided New Burdens funding for CARF and other reliefs at the end of March 2023.
- 2.3 A comprehensive review of Small Business Rate Relief commenced in 2021. A three-pronged review looking at those in receipt who did not claim SBRR, along with external data matching and rolling award reviews. This review is still ongoing, and it has been agreed with internal Audit that it will be completed by October 2023. Resource has previously been diverted to the CARF scheme, as detailed above.
- 2.4 During 2022/23 preparations were made for the NDR Revaluation by the Valuation Office Agency. This was the first Revaluation for 7 years – each property is assigned a new valuation by the VOA. The team has maintained and balanced 2 Valuation lists since December, the old list and the new 2023 list and handled the resultant customer contact, although this was less than anticipated.
- 2.5 We continue to see significant increases in the number of phone calls and work items, including correspondence, to the Business Rates team as a result of the previous Covid schemes and CARF, as seen below. Furthermore, there has been a steady increase in businesses (hereditaments) coming into rating across ARP, including Fenland.



2.6 There have also been many other demands on our resource since during the past year in order to communicate with and update customers, Government, and the partner authorities. These include: -

- Updates to website
- Updates to recorded messages on the telephones (RAD messages)
- Amendments to templates which mention recovery action/costs.
- Additional web forms published to allow ratepayers to request payment arrangements.
- Provision of statistical data for comparison & monitoring of progress
- Regular review meetings with partner authorities for Grant application queries
- Daily monitoring of info from the Government
- Government returns.

2.7 Business Rates Collection

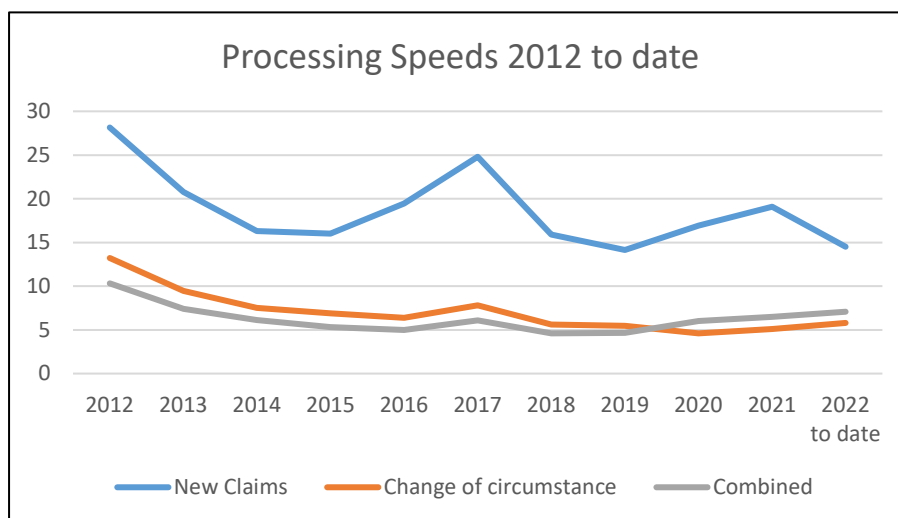
Business Rate Collection rates exceeded target in Fenland at the end of 2022/23 financial year.

Fenland collection.

Target March 2023	Collected	Variance
£24,017,406	£24,120,990	+ £103,584

2.8 Billing and Benefits

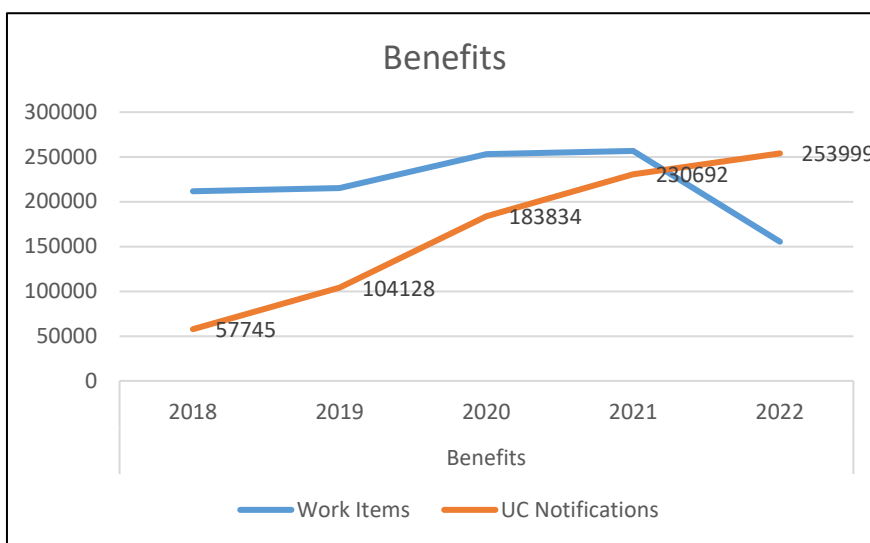
Benefits performance continues to achieve agreed targets each year. For Fenland Council specifically, in 2012/13 new claims were being processed in just under 30 days and change of circumstances in over 10 days. Performance at the end of 2021-22 was 19 days for new claims and just over 5 days for change of circumstances. This year to date we have processed new claims in 14.5 days and changes in 5.8 days and we expect the figure for changes to come down further by the end of the year. For Fenland and all other partner's current performance is well below the national average of 21 days for new claims and 9 days for changes. The chart below shows the performance since 2012/13: -



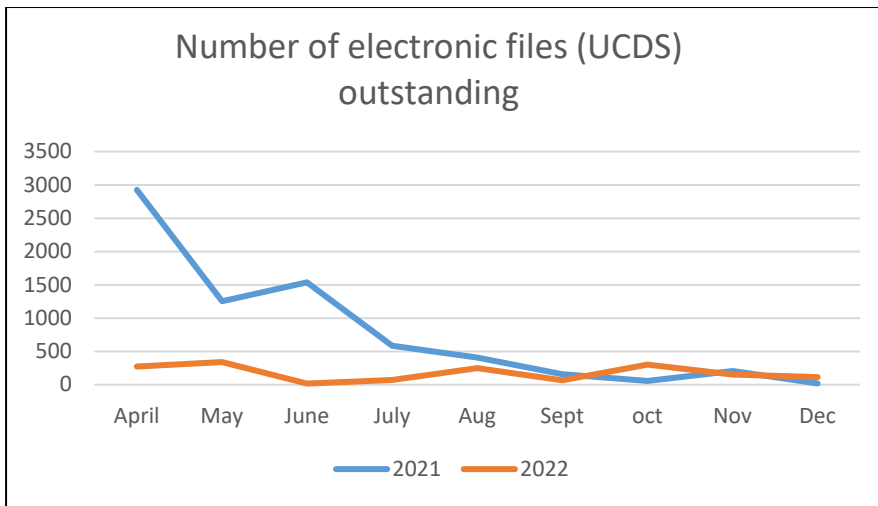
2.9 Due to previous changes introduced to our Local Council Tax Support schemes, the impact on customers has been significantly reduced given we do not require customers to complete a separate application form to claim support. Instead, we take DWP data files to trigger a claim for Council Tax Support. It should be noted that most Councils still insist

on an additional claim form, thereby placing unnecessary further burden on customers at these difficult times.

- 2.10 We have continued to work with our software supplier to improve automation of Universal Credit (UC) First Payment files and are automating 95% of those that are not linked to a live claim already, with fewer light touch checks in place. This provides customers with Council Tax reduction decisions within one day for those automated. We have worked hard to increase automation over the past 2 years from 55%.
- 2.11 The number of work items received per year in benefits has increased by 52% since 2018 and we have also seen significant rises in the number of UC monthly changes notified by DWP. Since 2018 the number of DWP records received per annum has increased over 4.3 times from 57,745 to 253,999 and in 2020, we saw a rise of 91% in one year alone due to the effects of COVID-19. This extra demand has been absorbed without any increase in establishment, nor impacting our customers or performance.
- 2.12 The number of work items and UC notifications received per year since 2018 are shown in the graph below:

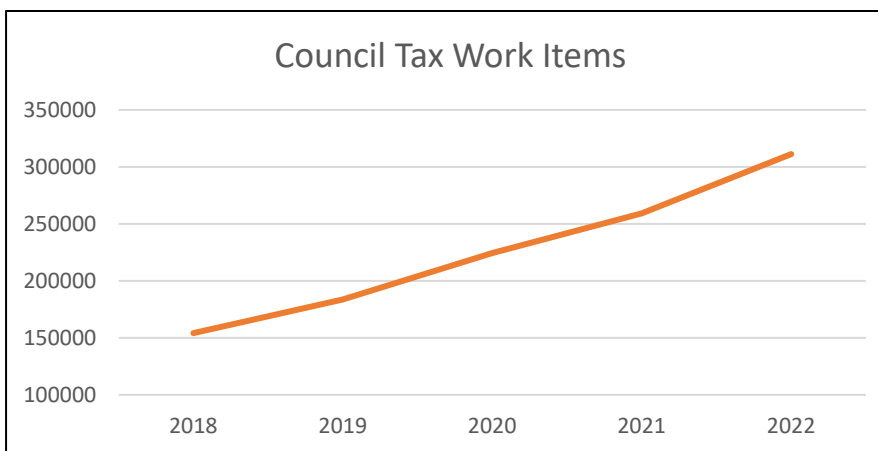


- 2.13 The impact of the increased UC change notifications has significantly reduced following the implementation of our project to automate these changes. During 2021 we made further improvements and changes to our LCTS scheme to simplify the customer experience, reduce customer contact and the need for evidence provision and rely more heavily on data readily available to us through DWP data sharing. With these changes in place, we now automate 95% of UC change files. Our success in this area and the close collaboration with our software supplier to achieve these results was acknowledged when ARP was shortlisted for the Innovation category in the 2022 IRRV Performance awards.
- 2.14 Automation has enabled us to reduce 9 FTE in our establishment and has prevented the need for a further 9 FTE posts that would be required to deal with the ongoing extra demand, a net reduction of eighteen posts. It should be noted we are aware most LAs are struggling to recruit additional staff where they do not have the level of automation we have in place, and consequently impacts their service provision.
- 2.15 The average number of outstanding UC notifications per month for this year, compared to last year, is shown in the graph below:



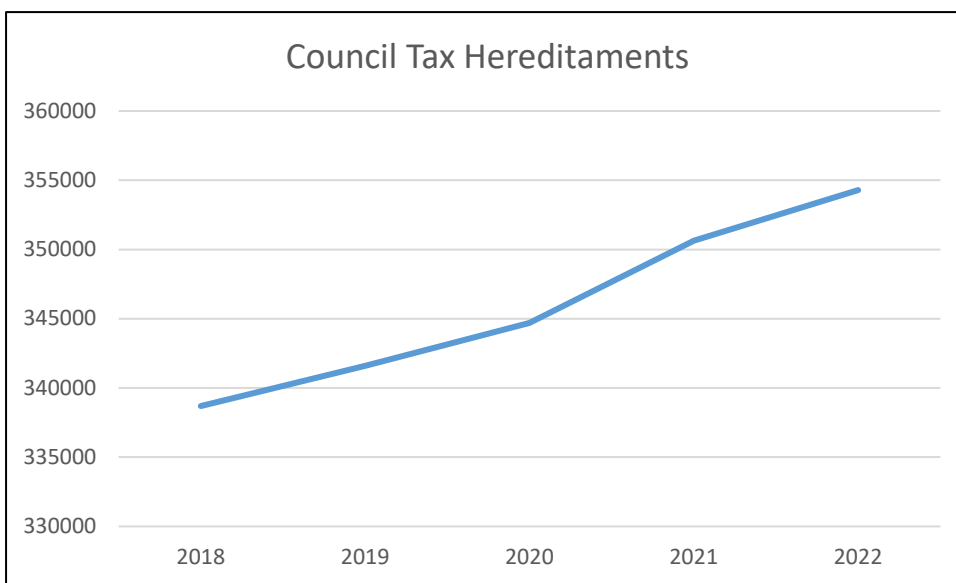
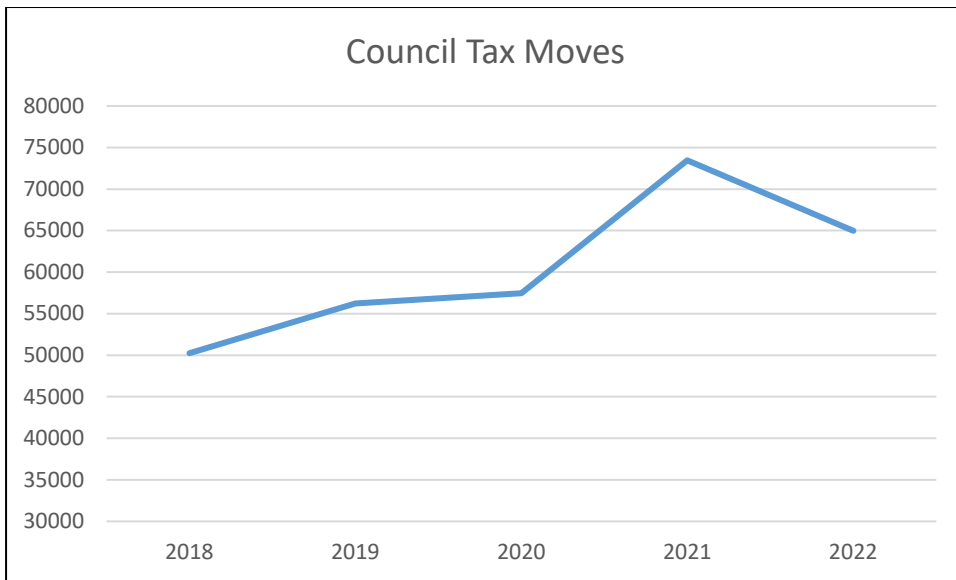
2.16 As part of the 2022/23 LCTR scheme changes the tolerance for monthly changes to earnings was increased from £65 to £100. This resulted in a further reduction in customer notifications and reduced requirement for us to frequently revise instalment payments, thereby helping customers with their budgeting. Other scheme changes introduced included fixed non-dependant deductions and removal of tariff income calculations for capital. These have all streamlined the customer experience, reduced the need for evidence provision and improved performance by increasing the opportunity to automate.

2.17 The number of work items received for Council Tax billing have also increased significantly and over the past 5 years we have seen a 102% increase as shown in the graph below.



2.18 The steady increase in work items continues and it is interesting to note the steep rise in address moves over the same period. The graph below shows the increase in the number of moves notified since 2018, where we saw an overall increase of almost 15,000 moves per year. This year to date we have been notified of 29% more moves than seen in 2018. Levels have reduced this year, compared to the extremely high number of moves we saw at the end of the pandemic, when restrictions were lifted but volumes are still considerably higher than we saw pre-Covid.

2.19 The number of moves notified each year is shown in the graph below:



- 2.20 Despite the growing volumes of work the outstanding work items across billing and benefits reduced by 4000 by the end of December 2022 despite the increased pressure from administering the Council Tax Energy rebates. By the beginning of March moves were completely up to date to assist with the administration of the Council Tax Support Fund as part of the Annual Billing process. As expected, we have seen an increase in work items following Annual Billing and through targeted campaigns are now starting to see this reduce. This is a direct result of our automation projects, streamlined processes and the introduction of a new generic role to improve Council Tax Billing work. This role continues to develop and provide much needed resilience and flexibility and places us in a good position as we embark on our annual billing project.
- 2.21 Without these improvements and given the increased demand caused by the administration of Government schemes such as Test and Trace support payments and the Council Tax Energy Rebates, it is likely the overall picture would not be as strong for customers. Our agile approach along with performance management has been key to the improvement's customers are seeing.
- 2.22 Government launched the Test and Trace support payment scheme late September 2020, overseen by the Department for Health & Social Care (DHSC). The scheme grants £500 to encourage people who have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 to self-isolate.

- 2.23 In partnership with our partner customer service teams and County Councils, we were able to quickly design and implement a claim form locally given the lack of a national DHSC claim form in time for the scheme to go live.
- 2.24 The scheme was extended three times and finally finished at the end of April 2022, although due to the 42-day claim window we continued to process claims until mid-June 2022.
- 2.25 In total ARP paid £511,500 to 1,023 Fenland residents who lost income due to self-isolating.
- 2.26 In negotiation with our three County Councils, we secured funding for temporary resources to help to administer the scheme and to design & deliver individual County & District Council discretionary schemes.
- 2.27 In October 2020 we signed up to an optional Government led DWP initiative, Housing Benefit Award & Accuracy (HBAA) to reduce fraud and error in the benefits system. We receive monthly data lists to conduct customer reviews to ensure the right benefit. It should be noted DWP made this scheme mandatory for every Council from the 2021/2022 and is funded by a DWP New Burdens grant.
- 2.28 In addition to HBAA we also process real time earnings and pensions (VEP) data to identify fraud and error. In Summer 2022 we worked with our software supplier to help design, beta test and implement automation of this data and are now automating around 55% of VEP alerts. At the end of Q3 this financial year Fenland's performance is above average for the East of England.

2.29 Council Tax Collection

Fenland – collection exceeded target at the end of March 2023:

Target March 2023	Collected	Variance
£64,734,624	£65,262,181	£527,577

Council Tax Rebate Grant

- 2.30 In February 2022, the Government announced a Council Tax rebate grant of £150 for all households in Council Tax bands A to D in England, or those in band E in receipt of a disabled band reduction. This Council Tax Rebate Grant, administered locally by ARP, was part of a £22 billion support package to help households with the rising cost of energy bills and included a Discretionary scheme to provide additional assistance to those in all bands.
- 2.31 Despite tight timeframes and software suppliers needing to develop new functionality to administer the grants, Government set a target of aiming to pay all those eligible for a payment under the main scheme, who paid their Council Tax by Direct Debit, by the end of April 2022.
- 2.32 The main scheme system functionality was released on 19th April, ARP was a pilot site, helping to shape, test and implement the software and through close collaboration with Capita, ARP met the end of April target for all 5 Partners.
- 2.33 ARP was also involved in helping Capita design the discretionary scheme functionality, providing ideas and modelling for different options to feed into the final product. This provided us with a great opportunity to ensure the functionality was be-spoke enough to provide for the proposed ARP schemes, but flexible enough to cover alternative options.

- 2.34 To ensure payments reached as many households as possible in a timely manner, ARP worked with customers to provide bank details, before applying remaining rebates to Council Tax accounts by mid-June.
- 2.35 Government monitoring data for this scheme was made available in August for April, May and June and the main highlights as at the end of June are shown below:
- The five ARP partner Councils were in the top 4% in England, and amongst only eleven authorities, out of 308, who had paid 100% of their main scheme payments.
 - Out of the 45 Councils in the East of England, ARP's 5 partners were the only Councils to have paid 100% of the main scheme payments by the end of June.

3 Other developments this year

- 3.1 The Annual Billing process was challenging with additional workload from the Business Rates revaluation and the administration of the Council Tax Support Fund. We also saw exceptionally high numbers of inserts and leaflet requests across the partnership and discovered after the bills were printed that Cambridgeshire County Council had provided incorrect percentages for their adult social care precept. A fantastic effort by the team ensured we re-billed for Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Councils in a timely manner, in time for the first direct debit payments and we were able to considerably reduce costs by carrying out the work in-house. Cambridgeshire County covered the full costs of the re-bill exercise; importantly, we ensured DD collection dates were not impacted.
- 3.2 ARP has a programme of projects called the Customer Experience. The programme is made up of several projects designed to deliver digital solutions for customers to access 24/7/365 services and automation, where possible, of back-office processing.
- 3.2 The Customer experience programme looks to improve customers experience by using self-service and automation. In the first instance this makes services readily available to customers who can self-serve whilst, freeing resource to help those more vulnerable who need more assistance.
- 3.3 Some time ago a Customer Strategy Group was set up to discuss the relationship between front facing and back-office functions, the group is made up of leading officers from each Council's Customer Team and leading officers from ARP. This group looks to make the process that we follow as efficient and effective as possible.
- 3.4 Customer Strategy Group are involved in the current E- billing and Direct Debit take up campaigns and since April 2021 we have seen the percentage of direct debit payers in Fenland increase from 67.4% to 73.3%. Current focus is on improvements to e-billing and simplifying the customer experience by offering e-bills as email attachments.
- 3.5 The increase in online forms and automation is testament to the success of the customer experience projects. By the end of 2022-23 ARP had received 110,585 online forms compared to 76,378 for 2021-22. The increase is attributed to the online shift as well as the administration of business grants and reliefs and the Council Tax Energy Rebates, for which we built our own in-house online application forms.
- 3.6 The success in automation is not restricted to Universal Credit data, other successful projects include:

- Moves automation – 20% automation.
 - first Capita site to go live following collaborative work to help design, beta test and implement improved functionality, this work continues.
 - Universal Credit Data – 95% automation
 - New LCTR claims - 50% automation.
 - Real time HMRC earnings and pensions data – 55% automation
 - This involved close working with software provider to design, test and implement new functionality – first Capita site to go live.
 - Single Person Discounts – 95% automation of online applications
- 3.7 Our close working with Capita has led to us becoming a reference site for Universal Credit data automation. Through this we have given presentations, featured in the IRRV magazine, attended webinars, and provided support to other Authorities to help design and implement simplified schemes which enable more automation, review their verification policies, and set up and test automation options.
- 3.8 Following this and other successes ARP has entered submissions into various external awards, resulting in:
- IRRV – winner in Excellence in Education and/or Staff Development
 - IRRV – finalist in Innovation/Digital Technology
 - CIVEA – finalist for Innovation (Enforcement Agency)
- 3.9 The ARP billing and benefits team also won ‘team of the year’ in the Fenland staff awards for their work with the Council Tax (energy) rebate scheme and the CARF (Covid Additional Relief Fund) business grants. A similar picture has been seen across the partnership with a staff award won at West Suffolk Council and commended in East Suffolk’s awards.
- 3.10 Other developments include a mini re-structure with the Support and Admin teams integrating functions back into the wider operational billing and benefits team. This has contributed towards efficiencies and provided a more agile and flexible team, through sharing knowledge skills and tasks.
- 3.11 With the Recovery and NNDR Operational Manager retiring in December, the role has been split, within budget, into two dedicated specialist job roles to provide resilience and greater direction within the team. This has also provided progression opportunities within the team.
- 3.12 Housing Benefit fraud transferred to the DWP on the 1 September 2015 for all partner Councils to become part of the DWP’s Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS). ARP presented a business case to Joint Committee to fund a post within the Counter Fraud team to concentrate on other areas of fraud, retaining the skills of experienced investigators to maximise areas of fraud which affect the income of the five partners and the three County Councils.
- 3.13 The team continue to enjoy success and to exceed targets. Along with other Cambridgeshire Councils, on behalf of Fenland and East Cambridge Councils, ARP developed a business case to join all other Cambridgeshire local authorities and Cambridgeshire County Council to form a Cambridgeshire Fraud Hub. The proposed model links to funding the review of Single Person Discounts at a local authority level and had been expected to be set up for the start of the 2022/2023 year. However, the County

Council rethought their approach to this project throughout the past year, now agreed with implementation in place for the 2023/24 year.

3.14 Whilst the Fraud team have continued to work on tenancy fraud cases since April 2015, the National Audit Office state that the average saving from tenancy fraud to the public sector purse is £93,000 per case. ARP continues to work with the annual Cabinet Office National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data extract to identify potentially fraudulent activity.

3.15 The table below shows the performance of the fraud team last year, with the Single Person Discount fraud showing the amount saved from the date the discount is removed to the end of the financial year, and assumes the saving will continue for a further year (as per NFI methodology): -

2022/23	Overall fraud identified	Fenland Fraud Identified	Fenland preceptor
Single Person Discount	£1,422,238	£149,147	£25,355
Council Tax Support	£200,286	£30,484	£5,182
Tenancy Fraud	£375,240	£0	£0
Other Council Tax	£240,031	£31,664	£9,294
Other Business Rates	£614,042	£14,042	£7,021
Total identified	£2,851,836	£225,336	£46,852

3.16 In agreement with Norwich City Council we have continued to provide similar fraud services; we are in discussions with Norwich to expand into tenancy fraud within their Council Housing stock.

3.17 Broadland and South Norfolk Councils commissioned ARP to conduct a review of their fraud service. This has led to a request for ARP to provide fully funded services, with a business case approved by Joint Committee, subsequently approved by each individual partner Council, with service delivery being implemented by the team.

3.18 ARP has also been approached by Lincolnshire County Council, leading a consortium of their seven District Councils, to provide a fully funded single person discount fraud service. A business case has been approved by Joint Committee and each individual partner Council. Discussions are ongoing with the County Council to implement the service this year.

3.19 In addition to the Enforcement Team using Tel Solutions automated treble touch campaigns (email, text and voice call), we have recently expanded that provision into customer soft reminders to pay Council Tax, issued before a formal reminder to pay. Since October 2022, the number of posted reminders has reduced by 3,000 per month, improving collection whilst reducing printing and postal costs.

3.20 Further Recovery

In the absence of funding by Cambridgeshire County Council, Fenland are contributing to allow this work to continue. For this year collection has exceeded last year's figure. This is partly due to the effects of Covid on the court system decreasing, enabling the team to progress more cases to reach Bankruptcy and Charging Order stages. Across the

partnership the small team of 3 staff collected just over £1 Million in 2022/23; Fenland's share is detailed below.

	2020/21	2021/22	March 2023
Council Tax	£73,644	£223,072.89	£198,205
Business rates	£13,457	£14,097.50	£233,204.53
Total	£87,101	£237,170.39	£431,409.53

4 Future developments

- 4.1 Joint Committee have determined it is unlikely that we will agree to any further full members unless the benefits of doing so are significant. However, it is still the intention to look for future growth in other ways.
- 4.2 A four-year Business Plan, to complement the annual Service Plan, was developed with Members from December 2021, with Joint Committee approval in March 2022, commencing April 2022.
- 4.3 Norwich City Council delegated their enforcement work to ARP from July 2019, whilst we have also secured funding from Norfolk County Council to enable us to undertake single person discount and Council Tax Support fraud work on behalf of Norwich City Council for two further years from 2022. In addition, similar funding from Suffolk County Council has been secured for two further years.
- 4.4 The Enforcement Agency is the likely area of further growth because the team are more responsive to customer needs and will make manageable arrangements for customers. In addition, the fees that are generated and collected provide a surplus that is retained by the Council Taxpayer.
- 4.5 We positioned ourselves to be selected to participate in a Cabinet Office pilot to receive employer details held by DWP & HMRC for the purposes of Council Tax debt recovery. These provisions are contained in the Digital Economy Act. This enhanced data share is expected to improve Council Tax collection. However, the HMRC's position changed as they declined to release information where a customer's National Insurance Numbers was not provided (which is not data we are allowed to record for Council Tax purposes) therefore the information received was less than anticipated. We remain part of the pilot and hope for further developments.
- 4.6 In collaboration with each partner's Housing teams we ran a campaign throughout the summer to bring empty homes back into use, complementing ongoing work undertaken by ARP throughout the year. This year we took a more risk-based approach to the exercise, conducting credit checks on the empty homes to identify those likely to be occupied. Review form questionnaires were then sent, and visits undertaken for any medium or high-risk cases where the form was not returned.
- 4.7 OIB have approved a programme of activities to be discussed and developed with Customer Strategy Team to run in line with the annual billing cycle to encourage take up of Direct Debit and e-billing, using nudge techniques, automated messages, and other initiatives.
- 4.8 The other major route to efficiencies and savings will come from online forms and back-office automation. Through the Customer Strategy Group, we will continue to seek to

consolidate the use of online services. The use of online forms allows for data from the forms to be uploaded into the Capita system and from there to be automated.

- 4.9 Automation and improved processes have already seen more than nine posts saved in the establishment from 2021/2022, whilst avoiding the need for additional resources to cope with increased demand, and we anticipate far greater savings if customers transact through online forms going forward.
- 4.10 We continue to work with Capita to further develop move automation and are hoping to gradually increase from the 20% automation of moves reported online. We are also beta testing a new move form and hope that this will offer more opportunity to automate in future. Currently around 40% of moves are reported online and we are undertaking a campaign to increase awareness and use of online forms.
- 4.11 As part of this campaign, we are also developing on a new online contact us form designed to be a streamlined one stop access point for customer contact. An intelligent information gathering tool linking into online forms will ensure we gather the correct information at the first contact and route it to the correct team. This should increase use of online forms and the potential to automate but will also reduce email traffic considerably and the need for manual indexing.
- 4.12 Three new Government schemes were introduced in December 2022.
- 4.13 The £100m Council Tax Support Fund, introduced within the Local Government Finance Settlement, is intended to support vulnerable households with their Council Tax bills.
- 4.14 The Government expects local authorities to use the majority of their funding allocations to reduce Council Tax bills for current working age and pension age Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) claimants by up to £25. Councils can then use their remaining allocation as they see fit and determine their own local approach to further support vulnerable households with Council Tax bills.
- 4.15 Fenland has been allocated £190,482 which should be applied as reductions directly to 2023-24 Council Tax bills and this will take place as part of the annual billing process, with residual funds set aside to provide further help by way of Council Tax exceptional hardship payments. As at the end of May £171,486 has been allocated with £19,561 left to support new claimants during 2023-24 and help those experiencing financial hardship.
- 4.16 The second scheme is the Energy Bill Support Scheme (Alternative Funding) which has been introduced to support households not automatically eligible for support via the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS), equivalent to the monthly subsidy direct payers receive.
- 4.17 The Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) now renamed Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are administering the scheme nationally via a claim route on gov.uk website. Local Authorities are required to undertake secondary checks, log the outcomes via a government portal and make the payments of £400. Fenland's number of estimated eligible residents is 2,199 with funding paid upfront to cover 80% of maximum costs. The scheme closed 31st May 2023, but applications can still be made during June for appointee cases. At the time of writing this report Fenland had paid out £72,400 in support to residents.
- 4.18 ARP has been involved as a pilot site helping to shape the process, develop guidance, design the portal, and agree the process. Whilst the national scheme launched on 20th February 2023, West Suffolk Council was live as a pilot site since early February and was the first Authority nationally to make a payment under the scheme.

- 4.19 The Third scheme is the Alternative Fuel Payments (alternative fund) also administered by BEIS with Local Authorities carrying out secondary checks and making payments of £200. The scheme went live at the beginning of March and closed on 31st May 2023. Fenland's estimate of eligible residents was 1119 and at the time of writing this report Fenland had paid out £60,800 in support to residents.
- 4.20 We currently have over 50 live projects and although some have been put on hold due to priority having to be given to all the additional government schemes, such as CARF business grants, Test and Trace, Council Tax (energy) Rebate scheme and the 2 new schemes, progress has continued for high priority projects, and we are starting to see real success in ongoing projects such as moves automation, e-bill email attachments and HMRC data automation.
- 4.21 Along with the West Suffolk ICT team, we are involved in a project to replace our customer telephony provision with a new supplier. A new supplier has been selected with implementation and training underway.
- 4.21 Other future automation projects include refund and credit automation, planned to work alongside the move's automation functionality and the automation of Direct Debits requested over the web. These projects are currently in the early discovery stages.
- 4.22 The ARP Strategic management team will continue to influence national initiatives such as Universal Credit, Business Rates and Council Tax reform, to influence system design to improve performance and generate efficiencies where possible and to enhance data share to help inform service design.