

**BRECKLAND COUNCIL**  
**FOREST HEATH DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
**EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the**

**ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE**

**Held on Thursday, 10 February 2011 at 2.00 pm in**  
**Room 2 Level 5, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT**

**PRESENT**

Mr F. Brown (Vice-Chairman)	Mr. J. Humphreys
Mr P.D. Claussen (Chairman)	Mr E. Stewart
Mr S. Edwards	

**In Attendance**

Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Mark Finch	- Head of Finance
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Terry Huggins	- Chief Executive
Sharon Jones	- Strategic Partnership Manager (ARP)
Rod Urquhart	- Operations Manager
Robert Walker	- Director - Community Services
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer

**1/11 MINUTES**

It was noted that the dates for future meetings had been changed and were now: 16 June (Annual Meeting), 29 September and 1 December 2011. Subject to that amendment, the minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2010 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**2/11 APOLOGIES**

Apologies had been received from Mr W Smith, Mrs L Pope and Mr D Burnip.

Mr T Huggins (Joint Chief Executive of Breckland and South Holland District Councils) had sent apologies as he would be arriving late.

Mr S Edwards advised that he would have to leave the meeting at 14.30 due to a prior appointment.

**3/11 URGENT BUSINESS**

There was none.

**4/11 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

No declarations were made.

**5/11 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)**

(a) Operational Performance

The Operations Manager presented the two reports. The January

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report had been circulated electronically and was tabled at the meeting.

It was noted that the Benefits caseload was increasing across all three authorities.

Indicator NI181 was amber for all three authorities and the team were working hard to address that. East Cambs also had an amber indicator for collection of Council Tax, as did Forest Heath. This was due to an increase in the number of properties and the extended payment period.

Forest Heath also had an amber indicator for the number of people paying by Direct Debit. It was known that some people cancelled their direct debit after the January payment and set it up again in April and it was hoped that advice could be made available to make it clear that this was not necessary.

The red indicator for Forest Heath was caused by the difficulty in recovering overpayments from people on Benefits. The amount that could be claimed back was legally prescribed and limited to a maximum of £12 per week. This meant that large overpayments would affect the indicator until the end of the financial year.

Members discussed the implications of this last point and asked if there was a way that the indicator could be amended so that such cases appeared in a separate column.

It was **RESOLVED** that a new indicator should be designed which would:

- (1) break down the figures to separate overpayments due to fraud from those that were not; and
- (2) show the figures in terms of the amount of money and the number of people involved, rather than as a percentage.

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Jones

With regard to Forest Heath's Council Tax collection rates, a Member asked if it was because people were not willing to pay. The Operations Manager advised that they were doing everything they could to improve the figures, including sending reminders via text and e-mail. They were taking a harder line with those that 'would not pay' and a softer approach for those that 'could not pay'.

The Strategic Partnership Manager said that they had tried expanding payments to twelve months, but this had not worked and they would be going back to ten months in future. Another issue was that there was a groundswell of people not wanting to pay their Council Tax. She knew of two websites which were actively encouraging people not to pay and she suggested that central Government should be advised of them as more and more Councils were being affected.

Members agreed that the websites needed to be closed down and Councillor Fred Brown agreed to contact Grant Shapps (MP) about this problem. The Strategic Partnership Manager agreed to speak to her contacts at the DWP regarding this.

Fred Brown

A Member asked for more information on the Projects, noted at item 3

in the report, to be made available. The projects were all linked to the expansion of the Partnership which was dealt with by a separate Project Board.

**RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Project Board should be added to the Joint Committee's agenda for information.

Finally a Member asked how the Direct Debit performance could be improved and it was suggested that the indicator was a little out of date and perhaps could include the number of people paying by other electronic means which would be a more meaningful figure.

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(b) **Financial Performance**

The Operations Manager presented the report which provided a snapshot of finances as at 31 December 2010. The variances in the figures were explained by the notes at the bottom of the report. There appeared to be a £152,000 surplus, but once the January to March spend was accounted for the surplus would reduce to £80-100,000. The budget was in a good position and all three Partners were receiving income from joint working with St Edmundsbury.

**6/11 BUDGET REPORT**

The Head of Finance (Breckland) presented the report, which sought approval for the annual revenue budget for the Partnership for 2011-12. At the previous meeting set-up and telephony costs had been approved to bring St Edmundsbury into the Partnership. This budget would cover running costs and reallocation of charges.

A couple of areas to note were:

1. based on the business case, the savings share and contributions required for the expanded Partnership had been redistributed in accordance with the risk/reward share apportionment;
2. there was a significant deficit in St Edmundsbury's Pension Fund; and
3. the amount of the grant from the DWP was expected to be less this year than previously.

With regard to point two, Members were asked to delegate authority to the S151 Officers of the four partner authorities to amend the fixed saving amount for St Edmundsbury to prevent the Pension deficit from affecting the other partner authorities.

With regard to point three, a report would be presented to the Committee to approve the use of the grant, once the amount was known.

**RESOLVED** that:

- (1) the 2011-12 partnership budget be approved; and
- (2) authority be delegated to the S151 Officers to agree an amended fixed saving amount for St Edmundsbury.

**7/11 PROPOSED LEGISLATIVE CHANGES**

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report which outlined the salient points of the proposed legislative changes, including Universal Credit.

There were a large number of changes and the issues affecting Housing Benefit were listed at item 3.2.1 of the report. One such change, the increased allowance in cases where a carer was required to care overnight, would necessitate the issue of flyers, to RSLs, CABs, etc to try to identify those eligible for the increase. An example of that flyer and two others, advertising the changes to the way Housing Benefit would be calculated from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011, was included on the agenda. There was a specific flyer that would inform Councillors of the proposed changes and this would be sent to all Councillors so that they were aware of the changes.

The report tried to give Partners an idea of the effect the changes would have on people in their area. Various examples were discussed.

Council Tax Benefit (CTB) was not to be included in the Universal Credit system and it had been announced that it would be localised. Such a scheme would be very difficult to manage although it could work in theory. More information was needed.

Due to the number of changes it was impossible to advise people what their benefits would be in April. The reduction in benefits might mean that landlords would have to accept less rent. There might be more changes after April.

The Chairman noted that the changes would create a lot of extra work for the ARP and the Strategic Manager confirmed that the Government would be providing some additional money to help pay those costs.

The Strategic Manager agreed to keep this item on the agenda.

The report was noted.

**8/11 OFFICERS OPERATIONAL BOARD**

The Strategic Manager provided a verbal update on the Officers' Operational Board. She confirmed that the meetings were useful as they provided an opportunity for the Directors from each authority to get together.

The Chairman had been concerned about the lack of tangible outcomes from the meetings but the Director of Community Services (Breckland) said that the outcomes were the agreement of items for the agenda and the resolution of lower-level work issues.

Office moves had started and the St Edmundsbury project was going well. Some staff were at risk and would be made redundant.

**9/11 DEVELOPING ARP'S STRATEGIC POSITION**

The Strategic Director (Resources) (Forest Heath) tabled a note updating Partners on his suggestions for the way forward for ARP,

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taking on board the comments made at the previous meeting.

The main focus of the Partnership should be on improving performance, however there were many other options to consider.

It had been clear from discussions that five or six was the maximum number of Partners to be effective and avoid stepped cost increases. Some Members felt that the current level of four was the optimum size.

The ARP did its job well and there was concern that if it tried to diversify it would be exposed to greater risk. Its primary focus should be on providing its core business service to others. The ARP model was exportable and could be offered to other emerging partnerships.

In the long term a number of 'hubs' could provide support across a wide geographic area in respect of procurement, benchmarking, training and development, etc.

There was potential to export the model in respect of other transactional services, but if this was to be pursued it would need to be clearly scoped.

A trading company could be used to provide the services suggested above. It might be possible to use the ARP(T) or there was the potential to establish a TECKAL company.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Director (Resources) (Forest Heath) for providing the Committee with a very good paper. Members discussed the suggestions at some length.

Concern was raised about the potential for new Partners to reap benefits from the work carried out by existing Partners. The Strategic Director (ARP) pointed out that it had to be made financially worthwhile to attract new Partners to join, however there were usually hidden savings to be found and no decision was ever made without a supporting business case.

The Strategic Director (Resources) (Forest Heath) agreed and said that they would have to be very selective to ensure that any future expansion 'stacked up financially'. He suggested that it might be better to push the hub proposal.

The Chairman supported this idea.

Discussion then moved to the proposal to use the ARP(T) to sell the Partnership. The Chief Executive (Breckland and South Holland) was concerned that only two of the existing Partners owned the Trading Company and the other Partners might feel that their assets were being used for the benefit of the ARP(T). He questioned the ownership of the intellectual property rights and suggested that they might belong to all four Partners equally.

Members felt that ARP should ask the ARP(T) Board to consider the future relationship between ARP and ARP(T).

The Strategic Partnership Manager (ARP) was asked to write to the ARP(T) Company Secretary and request that a meeting of the ARP(T)

Sharon Jones

Board be held to discuss future relationships and strategy between ARP(T) and ARP.

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**10/11 REQUEST FOR FUNDING RING FENCED BY DWP**

The Operations Manager (ARP) presented the report which sought approval to share the costs of implementing legislative changes to incapacity benefit.

Over the next 18 months to two years there would be a migration of claimants from Incapacity Benefit to Employment Support Allowance (ESA). Funding had been awarded to all three partner authorities to help with the cost of this change, by the DWP. It was suggested that costs should be shared as per the current partnership agreement with any residual balances being retained by the individual partner authority.

It was not yet known what the necessary software conversion would cost. Partners were therefore requested to delegate authority to the Section 151 Officers to agree the final costs and redistribution of any surplus.

The Chief Executive (Breckland) asked what would happen to St Edmundsbury's unconverted data and was advised that their system would convert compatibly with the Partnership's.

**RESOLVED** to delegate authority to the relevant S151 Officers to agree costs and redistribute any surplus.

**11/11 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)**

The following items were put forward:

- Regular updates on changes to legislation and their effects on the Partnership

The Strategic Director (Resources)(Forest Heath) suggested that an additional meeting would be required before the end of March, to agree future strategy.

The Chairman asked for information to be provided to all Members (regardless of political party) to help them deal with revenues and benefits questions from constituents. The Strategic Manager (ARP) agreed to forward the briefing note to each Partner's Communications Team.

Sharon Jones

**12/11 NEXT MEETING**

Members felt that another meeting was needed before the next scheduled meeting on 16 June 2011, to discuss future strategy.

It was **AGREED** that an additional meeting would be arranged for the end of March 2011.

Helen McAleer

It was further **AGREED** that future meetings would commence at 4pm.

**13/11 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED** that under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

**14/11 POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES (STANDING ITEM)**

The Strategic Manager (ARP) said that she was talking to two other authorities and another partnership. Some interest had been expressed in future 'hub' proposals.

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The meeting closed at 4.05 pm

CHAIRMAN