

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, 17 March 2011 at 4.00 pm in the
Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Mr F. Brown (Vice-Chairman)	Mr. J. Humphreys
Mr P.D. Claussen (Chairman)	Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr S. Edwards	

In Attendance

Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Sharon Jones	- Strategic Partnership Manager (ARP)
Lesley Walker	- Principal Income Officer
Robert Walker	- Director - Community Services

15/11 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2011 were confirmed as a correct record but were not signed by the Chairman as the original was not available.

Confirmation of the relevance of 6/11 point 2 was requested regarding the significance of the deficit in the SEBC pension fund. It was confirmed that the deficit from previous years should not be funded by ARP.

A Member asked if there was any further information available regarding the localisation of Council Tax Benefit within the Universal Credit proposals. The Strategic Partnership Director confirmed that there have been no further updates.

16/11 APOLOGIES

Apologies had been received from Councillor E Stewart and Rod Urquhart.

17/11 URGENT BUSINESS

There was none.

18/11 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

19/11 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

Operational Performance

The Strategic Manager presented the performance report for February 2011 which had been circulated electronically.

Action By

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The partnership continued to work hard to provide an excellent service and had recently met with South Cambridgeshire District Council who had requested we provide help and advice to them for providing a better service to Registered Providers.

Indicator NI181 was amber for all three authorities and was unlikely to go green by the end of the financial year. It was noted that the target of 5 days was extremely challenging and although it was unlikely to be met, it would not be far out. ARP staff had worked hard to achieve the current performance with the extra work involved with SEBC joining the partnership.

It was noted that the performance figures would be amended from April to show a breakdown of overpayments to separate those due to fraud, and to show the amount of money/number of cases rather than a percentage, as agreed in the previous meeting. It was also noted that recovery of large fraud overpayments was often slow as recovery from ongoing Housing Benefit was restricted to £12 per week.

The Strategic Partnership Manager said that it was still possible that East Cambs could meet the 5 day target for NI181 but there were still problems with Council Tax collection.

Although staff at ARP were working hard to reduce NI181 across all three authorities there had been a higher number of new claims for Forest Heath received pro rata. Council Tax for Forest Heath was still a problem despite a recent Direct Debit Campaign.

Lesley Walker (ARP Income Manager) explained the ongoing Council Tax recovery strategy and current procedures:

- There had been a new Bailiff contract which was working well and had increased bailiff collection.
- Focusing on getting bills correct at first issue and reviewing discounts and exemptions. This has involved working with the USAF to review 6000 class P exemptions and the exercise had left the partnership just 2000 to review individually.
- Emails to promote DD take up and DD prize draw promotion.
- Single Person Discount review with Annual Billing

A private company had offered a solution for identifying new properties but a sample data match they had provided had not found any significant data to work with. There was also a meeting on 15 April 2011 to discuss a County wide Single Person Review funded by Cambridge County. This was done for Forest Heath this year as a Suffolk wide exercise.

Lesley Walker requested that East Cambs had the same facilities for taking telephone payments as Breckland and Forest Heath. Cllr F Brown suggested that this would be part of the new East Cambs front of house arrangement but Sharon Jones questioned that there may be IT issues.

Sharon Jones

Members questioned the re-profiling for Forest Heath that had taken place and would be delaying some recovery until February and March 2011 – how confident were ARP that collection rates would catch up?

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Lesley Walker had extrapolated figures from expected DD collection and bailiff payments that suggested 2% collection over the month.

Mr W Smith asked for a breakdown of the £20,000 overpayments and it was agreed that they would be identified and details provided to Members.

Mr W Smith commented that the reduction in Council Tax arrears did not seem to change which meant a loss of income and interest. Sharon Jones explained that ARP tried not to write off arrears and were doing more than ever before to try to collect them, including more use of Bailiffs, and current year collection was always a priority. Sharon Jones suggested that ARP needed to identify which years the arrears apply to as ARP policy was to carry arrears forward. Some may be over 16 years old and ARP were currently applying for some of the older arrears to be written off.

Sharon Jones explained that most Local Authorities wrote off arrears when changing ICT Systems. Breckland had not done this for 16 years and ARP did not systematically write off arrears as some took years to recover.

ARP had recently started using Charging Orders for collection of Council Tax arrears. As this process had only been implemented this year cases were chosen carefully (mainly landlords) to ensure they were not sensitive, to prevent making people homeless. ARP liaised with Legal in all cases and undertook full investigations to reduce the possibility of bad publicity.

The Chairman questioned whether ARP could obtain the information on new properties that the private company offered a solution for. Lesley Walker explained that ARP worked closely with the planning department and used Visiting Officers but the Chairman asked if there was software available to identify utility bills and a Member commented that planning information was not reliable and information needed to come from building control.

Lesley Walker explained that Academy had a separate module which recorded and monitored new builds and the Visiting Officers had started work on identifying the information required to ensure they were all picked up. This exercise had been put on hold but would be resumed after April 2011. There was no legal system that allowed data matching for all customers.

20/11 BUSINESS RATES

A guide was circulated prior to the meeting and the Strategic Partnership Manager explained that it was for advice only and explained some recent changes to empty property exemptions.

Members questioned whether it would benefit some businesses not to register as empty as they may be entitled to 100% relief. The Strategic Partnership Manager pointed out that the Council might have to pay for the relief and explained that ARP looked at each individual case when offering advice on the best way to register, and were always looking to minimise the amount businesses had to pay. She requested that Councillors used the guide in conjunction with officers who might give

individual help.

Cllr F Brown commented that there were a lot of Charity Shops selling new goods rather than used or second hand and the Strategic Partnership Manager agreed that an exercise was needed to look into these as ARP was only aware of cases that were reported at present, although all charities were looked into individually and consideration was given to whether the charity was local or national when requesting further details.

The Chairman asked for an update on the brewery situation and the Strategic Partnership Manager said she was waiting for a response to her enquiry and would ensure this was chased. She said that ARP had attempted to help breweries by writing to them when they were advertising and training landlords to offer advice and information on rateable values etc, but had had no response.

Action By

Sharon Jones

21/11 ARP FUTURE STRATEGY

'Strategic Development – Note for Joint Committee 17 March 2011' was distributed by Andrew Claydon.

(a) Future Relationship Between ARP and ARPT

The Operation Improvement Board had discussed the Partnership's aims and the alignment of the Company and Partnership in the transition of Welwyn and Hatfield leaving ARPT. It had been agreed that shares could be bought.

(b) Strategic Development

The board met for the first time on 16 March 2011 and had issued a draft guide to new partners joining. The message identified the aims and how they should be achieved, with some points still requiring discussion.

Andrew Claydon pointed out that the services in point (1) could be broader and not restricted to Revenues and Benefits alone and clarified that the intention of point (2e) was for the Partnership to help other partnerships to facilitate improvements but not to implement them

Cllr F Brown said that ARPT was the vehicle to deliver but the expertise came from within the partnership and clear direction was needed for the future.

Cllr W Smith agreed that the skills were within ARP but required the assets of ARPT and alignment needed to be agreed with East Cambs now. Cllr W Smith said ICT was a major support within ARP and he would be happy to place Breckland's ICT under Forest Heath to share resource and skills base.

The Chairman suggested that a section was added to point (4) to state that Members would explore the possibility of close alignment between partners and ARPT.

A member suggested that an addition could be made surrounding ICT support, as this could help ARP build up specialism and help marketing and sales for ARPT.

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It was **agreed** that an addition would be made to the end of point (1) to read ‘...best practice, including relevant support services’

Andrew
Claydon

Cllr F Brown said that East Cambs would buy in with full support and this had already been approved by the Council. A three way meeting would be required between Chief Executives.

It was **agreed** that the board would carry on working on the Strategic Development Paper and move forward with East Cambs by obtaining a valuation and agreeing figures.

22/11 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be held on Thursday 16 June 2011 at 4.00 pm.

The Chairman asked for the following items to be added to the next Agenda:

- (1) Update on the Brewery situation
- (2) Process for identifying new homes for Council Tax purposes

CHAIRMAN