

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
FOREST HEATH DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 4.00 pm in the
Level 5, Meeting Room 2, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Mr D Ambrose Smith
Mr P.D. Claussen
Mr R. Everitt
Mrs A. Gower

Mr P Moakes
Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr E. Stewart

In Attendance

Alison Chubbock
Andrew Claydon
Linda Grinnell
Sharon Jones
Ann Parry-Jones

Rod Urquhart
Robert Walker
Liz Watts
Helen McAleer

- Accountancy Manager
- Strategic Director (Resources)
- Head of Finance
- Head of Shared Service (ARP)
- Operations Manager (Revenues & Benefits)(ARP)
- Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)
- Assistant Director of Commissioning
- Chief Finance Officer
- Senior Committee Officer

Introductions

New Members were welcomed and introductions made round the table.

23/11 CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN (AGENDA ITEM 1)

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Mr P Moakes be appointed Chairman of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year; and
- (2) Mrs A Gower be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

Mr Moakes in the Chair

24/11 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 March 2011 were confirmed as a correct record.

25/11 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 3)

Apologies for absence were received from Mr S Edwards and Mr A Killington.

Action By

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26/11 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

27/11 DECLARATION OF INTEREST (AGENDA ITEM 5)

No declarations were made.

28/11 PERFORMANCE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 6)

(a) Operational Performance

The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) presented the three Performance Reports for March, April and May 2011.

There had been a dip in Council Tax collections and analysis was being carried out to try to address the reasons for that. The bailiffs were taking a harder line but still trying to stay customer friendly in the tough economic climate.

There had been a number of critical projects at the end of the last year but good service standards had been maintained.

Officers were being pro-active in trying to collect Council Tax. A large increase in new properties might be linked to the non-payment, but the debt could not be enforced until the Valuation Office set the banding for new properties.

Additional information had been provided with the May figures as requested at a previous meeting. All indicators were green. St Edmundsbury's figures would be aligned when IT issues had been addressed.

The reports were noted.

(b) Financial Performance

The Accountancy Manager (Breckland) presented the report and advised that the surplus for the year ending March 2011 was £189,000. The report at Agenda Item 10 would show the surplus split.

The report was noted.

29/11 SERVICE PLAN (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of Shared Services (ARP) presented the Plan which she said was self explanatory. She drew attention to the following:

- Page 29 Partnership Development – ARP hoping to become a hub to provide Universal Credits
- Page 30 – the Partnership would be looking for additional Partners and partnerships at a distance, to make savings
- Current priorities were likely to be reviewed and would be looked at again in Quarter 3
- Pages 33/34 – listed planned achievements. An update on each project would be provided quarterly.
- Page 35 – ARP worked closely with ARPT, although East

Action By

Cambridgeshire and St Edmundsbury were not in the Trading Company, the item had been included for information.

Questions were asked about Quality Assurance. This was carried out by a team internally using a software system to monitor performance which provided great flexibility.

The number of complaints about the bailiffs was raised and a Member asked how it could be ensured that they were doing a fair job. The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) advised that regular operational meetings were held to review complaints, progress and collection issues. Work was also being done to collate information and check for particular pockets of deprivation. The aim was to provide a firm but fair service.

No amendments were requested.

RESOLVED to approve the Service Plan for the ARP for 2011-12.

30/11 COUNCIL TAX COLLECTION CRITERIA (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Head of Shared Services (ARP) explained that she had written the report to inform new Members of the salient points of how Council Tax was collected.

Every effort was made to collect Council Tax in the current year. However, where clients were trying to pay but struggling, payments could be extended into the following year – but this was avoided where possible due to the potential impact on future payments, but also on the debt of the individual, and the wish to reduce debt.

The Vice-Chairman asked if the reminder letter provided options for paying and was advised that it did not. Options were provided in the bill and it was pointed out that the reminder did ask the customer to make contact if they were having difficulty paying. She also asked how 'vulnerable', mentioned at Level 3 Recovery, was defined and was advised that guidance was provided internally.

The report was noted.

31/11 POLICIES FOR ADOPTION (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Head of Shared Services (ARP) advised that there were a lot of Policies to be adopted following St Edmundsbury joining the Partnership. Four were on the current agenda and another 11 would follow on future agendas.

Appendix A – Benefits Appeals Policy and Procedure

RESOLVED to adopt the Benefits Appeals Policy and Procedure.

Appendix B – Investigating & Visiting Officer's Code of Conduct & Safety Policy

The Vice-Chairman sought assurance that the current Health & Safety training arrangements would cover all Partners and the Head of Shared Services (ARP) confirmed that she was comfortable with the

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arrangements.

RESOLVED to adopt the Investigating & Visiting Officer's Code of Conduct & Safety Policy.

Appendix C – Post Opening Policy

RESOLVED to adopt the Post Opening Policy.

Appendix D – Overpayments Policy

This Policy explained the procedure for recovering overpayments and a leaflet was also available, in plain English, clearly setting out the steps taken.

Subject to amending the revision date to 6.6.11 it was:

RESOLVED to adopt the Overpayments Policy.

32/11 2010/11 BUDGET SURPLUS (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) said that 2010-2011 had been a good year for the Partnership. Due to prudent budgeting and additional income strands there had been a surplus of £189,000 which had already been allocated to the Partners that were in the ARP during that year. Appendix A set out the financial implications.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the report; and
- (2) approve the re-distribution of the surplus to the partner authorities.

33/11 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AND SMALL BODY RETURN (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The Accountancy Manager (Breckland) presented the report and explained that changes to the Regulations meant that the Joint Committee was now classified as a Small Body which simplified the Annual Statement of Accounts and provided a big saving in both cost and time.

On page 93 the income for the year was shown at row three and on rows four and six the costs were set out.

The Annual Governance Statement was shown on page 94. Section three would be completed once the accounts were returned.

Both documents had been signed by the Assistant Director for Finance (Breckland) and needed to be signed by the Chairman.

A Member asked if the Partnership would exceed the Small Body threshold now that St Edmundsbury had joined. The Accountancy Manager believed that turnover would remain under £6.5million.

RESOLVED to:

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- (1) approve the accounting statement for the year ended 31 March 2011;
- (2) approve the annual governance statement; and
- (3) note the internal audit report and review of governance arrangements.

NB The Chairman signed the Statement of Accounts and the Annual Governance Statement at the conclusion of the meeting.

34/11 ATLAS FUNDING REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) presented the report which updated Members on the legislative changes following the DWP initiative to transfer data functions. The National rollout of the new system would begin in July and end in December.

DWP funding had been set aside to pay for software, training, publicity, etc. The breakdown of costs was set out at Appendix A to the report. There would be a surplus at the end which it was proposed to share between the Partners at the agreed ratio.

(It was noted that at point 3.2.3 of the report the St Edmundsbury percentage was incorrect – it should be 28.43 not 26.43 as shown. The percentage was correct in Appendix A).

Subject to the above amendment it was:

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report; and
- (2) approve the payments necessary from the partner authorities to Breckland Council for the 1st phase & grants;
- (3) delegate authority to the Partners' S151 Officers to approve the expenditure for any future phases; and
- (4) approve the distribution of the surplus at the agreed gain share rates.

35/11 DWP EXTRA ADMIN 2011/12 FUNDING REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) advised Members that the report on the agenda had been superseded by the report issued with the agenda supplement (pages 127-131).

Additional funding had been awarded by the DWP to help Local Authorities with the administration costs caused by increased caseloads. The breakdown of expenses was set out at Appendix A to the report.

Following the inclusion of St Edmundsbury in the Partnership their databases were being converted to the same system as other Partners. It was proposed to employ additional full time and agency staff to cover the conversion period to avoid impacting on performance.

A Member asked how the £15,000 earmarked for Infrastructure Review would be broken down and the Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) said that more details would follow.

Rod
Urquhart

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report;
- (2) approve the payments necessary from the partner authorities to Breckland Council; and
- (3) approve the distribution of any surplus at the agreed gain share ratio for spending on customer/benefits services.

36/11 LHA FUNDING REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) presented the report which sought approval to share the funding provided by the DWP to pay for changes to software, training, documentation and publicity following new legislation in respect of Local Housing Allowance Rates.

There was expected to be a small surplus which would be shared between the partners at the agreed rate. It was noted that the rate for St Edmundsbury was incorrect in the report and should be 28.43%.

Subject to that amendment it was:

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report;
- (2) approve the payments necessary from the partner authorities to Breckland Council;
- (3) approve the distribution of any surplus at the agreed gain share ratio.

37/11 SMALL BUSINESS RATES RELIEF (SBRR) FUNDING REPORT 2011-12 (AGENDA ITEM 15)

The Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)(ARP) presented the report which informed Members of an extension to the previously reported enhanced scheme for Small Business Rate Relief. The scheme would be extended to 30 September 2012 and approval was sought to approve the sharing of costs, etc.

It was noted that the St Edmundsbury percentage rate was incorrect and should read 28.43%. Subject to that change it was

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report;
- (2) approve the principle of cost share;
- (3) delegate authority to Partner S151 Officers to agree the final costs and distribution of any surplus.

38/11 UNIVERSAL CREDIT (AGENDA ITEM 16)

The Head of Shared Services (ARP) gave a verbal report to Members on the latest information received.

A copy of her report is attached for information. Members are asked to note that the information, which was taken from the DWP and CLG newsletters and websites, was correct at the time of the meeting, but is subject to change.

	<u>Action By</u>
The report was noted.	
39/11 <u>FORTHCOMING ISSUES (AGENDA ITEM 17)</u>	
None.	
40/11 <u>NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 18)</u>	
A new date for the next meeting would be arranged and notified to Members.	Helen McAleer
41/11 <u>EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 19)</u>	
<u>RESOLVED</u> 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.	
42/11 <u>POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES (AGENDA ITEM 20)</u>	
The Head of Shared Services gave a verbal update on the current position with regard to the various discussions she was having with other authorities.	

The meeting closed at 6.00 pm

CHAIRMAN

**Report of Operational Board to the
JOINT COMMITTEE – 16th June 2011**

Author: Sharon Jones

Proposed legislative changes to the Benefits Scheme

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To inform members of the salient points of the proposed Legislative changes, including Universal Credit.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee:

- 2.1 Note the contents of the report

Note: In preparing this report, due regard has been had to equality of opportunity, human rights, prevention of crime and disorder, environmental and risk management considerations as appropriate. Relevant officers have been consulted in relation to any legal, financial or human resources implications and comments received are reflected in the report.

3. Information, and issues

3.1 Background

3.1.1 The Governments' White Paper, 'Universal Credit: welfare that works' provides an overview of the proposed changes to the various welfare schemes. In preparation for Universal Credit the legislation that regulates the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit scheme will be changing. This report is about the legislative changes.

3.1.2 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has produced several Briefing Notes on the proposed changes and the transitional arrangements.

3.1.3 I have included in this report an overview taken from documents published by the DWP, The Centre for Social Justice and Inside Housing

3.1.4 As the information available is constantly being updated, this report has been provided on the date of the Joint Committee as is up to date as of 14th June 2011

3.2 Issues

3.2.1 The proposed changes affecting Housing Benefit, announced during 2010, are listed below:

- i. The removal of the £15 excess element brought in with Local Housing Allowance (LHA) **implemented April 2011**
- ii. An Increased allowance where a carer is required to care over night **Implemented April 2011**
- iii. The restriction of the maximum size of dwelling on which HB **payable Implemented April 2011.**
- iv. The restriction of the maximum rent allowed in the calculation of Housing Benefits (does not affect any current claim in ARP area)
- v. The limiting the LHA to the 30th percentile of rents rather than median
- vi. Increase of Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) grant to allow LAs to provide temporary additional help
- vii. The introduction of a Transitional scheme
- viii. Housing Benefits restricted to a single room rate extended to single under 35 year

- olds
 - ix. Annual Benefits Up-rating based on Consumer Price Index not Retail Price Index.
 - x. Local Housing Allowance rates will be increased on CPI rate not by housing market rents
 - xi. Introduction of property size criteria for those claiming and living in the Social Rented Sector
 - xii. Reduction of HB by 10% where Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) has been paid for more than 12 months
 - xiii. Capping of total benefit payments to average earnings levels
 - xiv. Localisation of Council Tax Benefit and cutting its cost by 10%
 - xv. Increased deductions for Non – Dependant deductions
- 3.2.2 The proposed reduction of Housing Benefit by 10%, after a claim for JSA is paid for a period of 12 months, has now been withdrawn. New processes will be in place to enable unemployed back to work.
- 3.2.3 The restriction to a single room rate for those younger than 35 years old will come into affect from January 2012.
- 3.2.4 Contributory Benefits, which include JSA Contribution based, Employment and Support Allowance (Contribution based), Severe Disablement Allowance and bereavement benefit, will continue to be available separately from Universal Credit. Universal Credit claims are made under a household basis, whereas Contributory benefits are claimed on an individual basis. The benefits will be available separately but a number of the rules will mirror those of Universal Credit, and these can be streamlined if both Contribution and means tested benefits are due.
- 3.2.5 The amount claimants can earn before they lose Contributory benefit can act as a disincentive to work. Therefore the Universal Credit tapers, designed not to disincentivise work, will also be adopted for contributory benefits, enabling an increase in the number of hours people can work without having benefit withdrawn.
- 3.2.6 The constraints on the affordability of the system have led incentives for first earners to be given priority over second earners. Investing in higher disregards for many working households. The aim of Universal Credit is to ensure that as many households as possible have at least someone in work and that work will pay for that household.
- 3.2.7 Under Universal Credit the majority of second earners will not have their work incentives reduced as they will already earn too much, as a household, to be eligible for income related support.
- 3.2.8 The annual maximum cap was announced 17th May, as £26,000 for working age families and £18,000 for single people. There are no exemptions to this in respect of carers, social housing or child benefit.
- 3.2.9 A package of transitional protection is being developed in order to ensure that there will be no cash losers as a direct result of the move to the Universal Credit where circumstances remain the same. 2.7 million Households stand to receive a higher amount under Universal Credit than they do at the time of conversion to Universal Credit.
- 3.2.10 The affordable homes programme will allow housing providers to charge up to 80% of market rents, and the paper was published 10th June 2011. .
- 3.2.11 There is to be an independent review of the HB reforms. Ian Cole, professor housing studies at Sheffield Hallam University, will lease an independent consortium to inspect the impact of the cuts in Housing benefit. The Consortium will spend two years monitoring the impact of the changes to the current HB system.

3.2.12 There will be 19 case study areas which will concentrate where the cuts will hit hardest. The group will report its initial findings early next year, and a final report in Spring 2013.

3.3 Options

3.3.1 To note the report

3.4 Reasons for Recommendation(s)

3.4.1 To inform members

4. Risk and Financial Implications

4.1 Risk

4.1.1 None

4.2 Financial

4.2.1 None

5. Legal Implications

5.1 None

6. Other Implications

None.

7. Alignment to Council Priorities

7.1 To be legally compliant

8. Ward/Community Affected

8.1 All within partner authorities

Background Papers

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Key Decision Status (Executive Decisions only):