

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, 8 March 2012 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 Moakes (Chairman)
Mr P.D. Claussen	Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr S. Edwards	Mr E. Stewart
Mrs A. Gower (Vice-Chairman)	

In Attendance

Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Mark Finch	- Assistant Director of Finance
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Sharon Jones	- Head of Shared Service (ARP)
Ruth Littlechild	- Human Resources Manager
Geoff Rivers	- Chief Executive - St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Rod Urquhart	- Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)
Robert Walker	- Assistant Director of Commissioning
Liz Watts	- Chief Finance Officer
Julie Britton	- Senior Committee Officer
Lucy Burt	- Fraud & Visits Team Manager

15/12 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

- (a) Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2011
- a) Performance Report (Minute No. 53/11)

A Member asked if the review mentioned in paragraph 2 that Forest Heath had undertaken had been rolled out to the other authorities. The Operations Manager advised that the review for the remaining authorities would start in the next financial year. Forest Heath had very interesting demographics and multi cultural populations and the review had uncovered some significant issues. Members were informed that the outcome would be included as part of the Performance report.

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Rod Urquhart

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With regard to the meeting that had been held to discuss ways of making improvements to collection rates, the Operations Manager said that ideas had come forward from the whole team and a number of quick wins had been identified. These ideas would be brought back to the meeting in June.

Rod Urquhart

A Member asked about the recent consultation paper that the CLG had acknowledged about authorities moving to a 12 month profile to ease debt burden, the Operations Manager explained that the consultation had been on the subject of Localised Council Tax, to begin April 2013 but ARP was considering a wide range of changes to help improve collection for the year starting April 2012. The Head of Shared Services advised that this would be the last year of Council Tax benefit before Localised Council Tax support and the welfare reforms including Universal Credit were introduced. It was likely that the Regulations due in May would include the default of 12 monthly instalments and not 10 as now. Members were informed that the responses from all partner authorities had been sent back to the CLG.

b) Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

(b) Minutes of the Special Meeting held on 25 January 2012

a) Letter to Members of Parliament (Minute No. 8/12)

In response to a question, the Head of Shared Services advised that the letter had been sent and to date only one response had been received from Matthew Hancock MP for West Suffolk, a preferred date had been expressed by James Paice MP from South East Cambridgeshire constituency and she had not heard from South West Norfolk MP, Elizabeth Truss; however, she had only received the two responses in the past week so it was likely that other responses were on their way.

b) Minutes

The Minutes of the Special meeting held on 25 January 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

(c) Minutes of the Special Meeting held on 3 February 2012

The Minutes of the Special meeting held on 3 February 2012

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were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16/12 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Stephen Edwards, Cllr Robert Everitt, Mr D Burnip, Mr A Killington and Mrs L Pope.

17/12 FRAUD (STANDING QUARTERLY ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 5)

The Frauds and Visits Team Leader was in attendance and updated Members on this item.

ARP was committed to preventing and detecting fraud and this report detailed the work that had been undertaken by the ARP Fraud and Visits Team during the period April 2011 to December 2011.

Referrals in relation to benefit fraud had been received from various sources. Visiting officers had been used and where necessary investigations had been conducted. The list of sanctions imposed had been listed in the report at Appendix A and it was agreed that this appendix, together with Appendix B that highlighted examples of current or recent significant cases should be included on the next available Cabinet agenda for information.

The year end figures for 2011 for each authority were highlighted.

A Member asked why the figures for Breckland Council were considerably higher than the others. He further asked how many cases were already in the system at the start of the year as this could have an affect on the figures. In response to the first question, the Team Leader explained that some cases were bigger which had resulted in an increase to the figures. In response to the latter, the Head of Shared Services pointed out that only the cases that had been completed for this particular year had been included as this was what Members had asked for. If further detail was required she asked that she be informed. This was the first of such reports therefore no previous information was available but Members would be able to get a general idea of what was going on as time moved on.

The Chairman stated that the information that the Committee was after was the scale of fraud activity and as it developed comparisons would be able to be drawn. This information was not available at this stage.

The Head of Shared Services was pleased to announce that Lucy Burt, the Fraud and Visits Team Manager had successfully completed a Financial Investigation course under the Proceeds of Crime Act. Lucy was congratulated. It was explained that this

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would now allow the Councils through Lucy's certification to apply to Courts for access to bank accounts and personal financial details and to recover any unaccounted money or valuables that had been collected as a result of fraudulent activity.

Members were provided with details of two specific on-going cases where such an investigation had been approved by the Courts – one at St Edmundsbury and one at Breckland.

The Chairman asked if the Fraud Investigation Team would work at any time with Revenue & Customs. Members were informed that if the case was big enough they did and it was already working with the Team to a certain extent.

Members were pleased with the work thus far as this was what ARP should be doing, stamping out fraud and recovering monies. They would be relying on the Team and the Head of Shared Services to attract some publicity on this.

The report was otherwise noted.

18/12 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Operations Manager provided Members with a 'snapshot' of the Performance report as at the end of January 2012 and updated the Committee on the main key areas.

Overall, the performance of the ARP had improved in comparison to the same time last year. The number of days in terms of processing new benefit claims at the end of February for Breckland Council had decreased slightly in comparison to the end of January but had still not hit the target of 5 days which due to the increase in case load was difficult to meet. There had also been some ICT issues that had had an effect on the target. For Council Tax, Breckland had performed better than this time last year.

Some authorities had had a substantial increase in new properties which would increase revenue but would also have a knock on effect to the collection rate. Twelve month instalments were being discussed with customers where this could help to recover money due.

The collection rate for Business Rates for St Edmundsbury Council was progressing and was running close to target. Unfortunately, in relation to Forest Heath there were a number of businesses that had gone into administration which had affected targets. A Member was perturbed about Forest Heath's target status as most were 'red' and felt that the authority could do a lot better. The Operations Manager pointed out that the out-turn position for Forest Heath had been very disappointing as at the

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end of January but it was a full 0.5% above the same figure as the previous year. There was a range of initiatives that he hoped to put into place of how to do things better which may well increase the collection rate by 98%. The Member mentioned the list of peculiarities that he had given to the Operations Manager which he felt should be discussed as a matter of urgency at the next Community Services meeting at Forest Heath. The Operations Manager agreed that a report would be compiled for discussion. There was some debate about the demographics of the said district and it was agreed that special measures should be put in place; the Operations Manager would advise.

In terms of East Cambs, there had been a significant increase in Council Tax debts. In relation to St Edmundsbury, with regard to the actual number of days to assess benefit, St Edmundsbury had asked for an adjustment to the way the figures were calculated once the automated rent increases had been put into the system. It was explained that the figures provided at the meeting were correct and the automated rent increases would be put into the system at the end of the year and then the adjustment requested would be made.

As far as business rates in general were concerned, there was a fair lack of understanding from small businesses that relief was available or it was too complicated to claim. Property Inspectors had since been instructed to carry out visits to inform them of their entitlement; it was hoped this could increase the take up of small business rate relief quite considerably.

Members were informed that the service plan targets were quite challenging and would not remain the same when the new regulations were implemented.

It was noted that an increase of an additional £284k had been collected in council tax debt for St Edmundsbury which would increase the collection fund receipts to the Authority.

A Member queried the debt for Breckland Council and it was explained that there had been an increase in the number of properties in the area as well as an increase in the number of Band D equivalents. The debt could also be related to the recent single person discount reviews.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) a report be compiled for the next Community Services meeting with regard to the status of Forest Heath's collection rate status; and
- 2) a report on this matter would also be brought to a future meeting of the Joint Committee for discussion.

Rod Urquhart

19/12 SERVICE PLAN 2012-13 (AGENDA ITEM 6A)

The Head of Shared Services presented the Service Plan for ARP for the forthcoming year. The Plan had been provided in draft form and had been written to broadly account for the changes likely to affect the service, such as:

- Universal Credits
- Localised Council Tax Support
- Localisation of Business Rates
- Single Fraud Investigation Services; and
- Funding

The Head of Shared Services said that she had not alluded to any further expansion of the Partnership within the Service Plan as an agreement had been to extend the partnership with two other district councils and only the phases and governance were still to be formally agreed. With welfare reforms, although currently very little had changed, once more was known about the legislative changes a further report would be brought back to the Joint Committee for discussion should a change of direction be prudent.

The Plan had two appendices, one was a high level risk report and the other was a timetable that provided details of headline requirements.

The Chief Executive of St Edmundsbury Borough Council raised concerns about risk reference no. 3 (failure to get the ARP agreement signed up) which appeared as a 'red' on the register and urged Members to give this matter their urgent thought and attention. The Chief Finance Officer explained that pension issues had prevented the agreement being signed thus far.

The contents of the report were otherwise noted.

20/12 POLICY TIMETABLE (AGENDA ITEM 6B)

The Head of Shared Services presented the report which informed Members of the proposal to bring policies to the Joint Committee by a rolling review bi-annually in accordance with Appendix A attached to the report. This would ensure that all policies were approved and fully considered in the most efficient manner without policies going to one Joint Committee and dominating the whole meeting.

The new procedure was explained.

RESOLVED that the approval of policies be spread over a bi-annual period as per the timetable attached at Appendix A of the report.

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Sharon Jones

Sharon Jones

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21/12 ARP HR POLICY DEVELOPMENT (AGENDA ITEM 6C)

The Head of HR and Corporate Support for Forest Heath District Council presented the report which highlighted the key HR policy areas that required development. Members' support was requested on the way forward.

The report had been constructed in partnership with St Edmundsbury District Council.

The HR ARP Group had previously worked on and recommended policy harmonisation areas to good affect; for example: Blended Salary Scales. Now that St Edmundsbury had recently joined the partnership further practical solutions required development. The areas that needed attention were:

- Flexitime and home working
- Salary Policy and Payline
- Performance Management
- Sickness Absence Policy; and
- Recruitment Procedures.

It had been suggested that a high level review across these policy areas would be a valuable piece of work and the benefits of implementing the above measures were explained.

The illustration of the approval path was highlighted.

In relation to flexitime, a Project Team had been established to work on a single scheme for ARP. This needed to be addressed as currently there were two very different schemes in operation. Any proposals would come forward to the Operational Improvement Board for final approval with a view to putting in a pilot scheme for three months before presenting it to the ARP JC as a permanent policy change.

For Salary Policy and Payline, it was necessary to bring the current Partners together onto one single payline – currently there were two. A good deal of work had previously been carried out on this matter prior to the addition of St Eds and the aim was to have a new salary policy and payline in place before the commencement of the financial year in 2013/14.

No issues or major risks had been identified.

A Member thanked the Head of HR for her report. He asked if talks were being had with the Unions. In response, the Head of HR explained that representatives from Unison had and would be involved as they were part of the ARP HR Group.

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A Member asked if the introduction of possible future partners would impact on this work. He also asked if it made sense to second staff. The Head of Shared Services stated that she would like to see one scheme for all so that any new staff from future partners could be integrated without any further redesign.

It was agreed that further information was required so that a decision could be made on the preferred scheme.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the work on the Salary Policy, Payline and Performance Management schemes be progressed;
- 2) a three month pilot flexitime scheme be introduced for ARP; subject to the Operational Improvement Board's agreement; and
- 3) all the above be brought back to the Joint Committee for approval or further discussion in due course.

Ruth Littlechild

22/12 UNIVERSAL CREDIT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of Shared Services provided Members with an update on the Welfare reforms from a Revenues and Benefits perspective. It had been agreed that a report be provided instead of a verbal update; however, the issue to consider was that changes were being made by Government and reported to the Local Authorities almost on a daily basis so any report would be out of date, and any updates provided to the JC might have to be reported verbally.

Universal Credit was a major part of the Governments Welfare Reform process with the White Paper having been published on 11 November 2010 which set the plans to have this introduced by October 2013.

Some matters were beginning to be 'flushed out' and it had become apparent that there were many questions that still had to be answered which accounted for the many updates in information.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had provided an account of what the latest delivery arrangements meant for Councils and the concerns and major issues raised by the Local Council Groups were highlighted. Many changes would have to be implemented at the same time and discussions with Members and the S151 Officers would have to be had in due course.

A Member felt anxious by the fact that so little was known. The Head of Shared Services advised that full regulations would not be received until October 2012 and the Localised Council Tax

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<p>Support scheme would legally need to be in place by the end of January 2013. This would be a very difficult and busy time for the ARP Team.</p> <p>Referring to fraud, Members were informed that cases would be chosen by the Single Fraud Investigation Services (SFIS) as managed by the DWP. There were issues with regard to the set up of Fraud Teams.</p> <p>ARP had registered an interest in the outcome and responses to Lord Freud's letters sent to all Leaders and Chief Executives around pathfinders and the welfare reforms.</p> <p>The report was noted.</p>	
<p>23/12 <u>FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 8)</u></p> <p>None.</p>	
<p>24/12 <u>NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 9)</u></p> <p>Following discussion, it was agreed that all future meetings would commence at 2.00pm.</p> <p>The meeting arrangements for the next meeting on Thursday, 14 June 2012 were noted taking into account the change of time.</p>	All to Note
<p>25/12 <u>EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 10)</u></p> <p>RESOLVED that under Section 100(A)9\$) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.</p>	
<p>26/12 <u>EXTRA ADMIN FUNDING REPORT 2012-13 (AGENDA ITEM 11)</u></p> <p>The Operations Manager presented the report which sought approval for additional administration within the Partnership.</p> <p>RESOLVED that the surplus monies be used to provide an Arrears Officer or be used to maximise the Council Tax sections ability to enable the Partnership to continue to provide its current level of service.</p>	Rod Urquhart
<p>27/12 <u>POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 12)</u></p> <p>The Head of Shared Services said that very little work had been carried out on this as the Partnership was not looking for full partners. Talks were still on-going with two contacts as the</p>	

Councils' future role in the welfare reforms were unknown and these contacts may be beneficial once these new roles were understood.

The report was otherwise noted.

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The meeting closed at 5.50 pm

CHAIRMAN