

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, 3 October 2013 at 2.00 pm in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24
1BT

PRESENT

Mr R. Everitt	Mr P Moakes
Mr S. Edwards (Chairman)	Mr D A Ray
Mr D Ambrose Smith	Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr P.D. Claussen (Vice-Chairman)	Mr J Waters (Substitute Member)

In Attendance

Sue Archer	- Support Manager (ARP)
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Lesley Walker	- Principal Income Officer (ARP)
Robert Walker	- Assistant Director of Commissioning (BDC)
Liz Watts	- Director (FH&SEBC)
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer (BDC)

31/13 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 June 2013 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

32/13 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Millar and Councillor Waters was present as his Substitute.

33/13 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

It was noted that an additional item of business concerning discussions with other Authorities would be discussed Below the Line.

34/13 FRAUD (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Sue Archer, Support Manager, presented the report in the absence of Lucy Burt who was attending an awards ceremony being held by the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation, as the ARP Anti-Fraud and Visiting Team had been nominated in the 'Excellence in Fraud' category.

Members asked to be notified of the result.

Action By

Sue Archer

Action By

The report was similar to the one presented to the previous meeting. Attention was drawn to the examples of significant cases at Appendix C which included the case of an ex Police Officer who had falsified an internet banking account.

Councillor Moakes asked if any funds would be recovered and was advised that if the individual was employed an 'attachment to earnings' could be sought. The Head of ARP noted that they could also apply for a County Court Judgement if no arrangement could be agreed. That could happen quickly, but further action would need to be carefully considered as it could be costly.

Councillor Ray asked what impact the delay to the introduction of the Single Fraud Investigation Service had had and whether the Team would be subsumed and then have a wider remit.

The Head of ARP explained that there were a number of options. Officers responsible for fraud activity would become DWP employees but would stay in the offices. It was not known if they would do other work too and working out that split was partly what was causing the delay, although it was probably also linked to Universal Credit.

Councillor Waters noted that in the two significant case examples given costs had been paid in the second case but not in the first. He suggested that a cost order should be sought to see if the individual could be required to pay.

The Chairman asked for information on costs to be circulated to Members.

Sue Archer

The report was otherwise noted.

35/13 PERFORMANCE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 6)

(a) Operational Performance

The Principal Income Officer was in attendance to present the report. She highlighted some of the key achievements and then noted that all indicators were green except the one for Forest Heath Council Tax Collection. That figure was down on the percentage required but more money had actually been collected.

Councillor Ray asked what the NDR Health Check had looked at and was advised that it had been a high-level review of structure and working practice which had resulted in ten recommendations, some of which had already been implemented.

The report was noted.

(b) Financial Performance

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The Assistant Director of Commissioning (BDC) presented the report on behalf of the Assistant Director of Finance (BDC) who could not be present.

The projected underspend related to a variance on employee related costs due to a number of vacancies. The figures were based on those vacancies remaining and would be affected if they were filled.

The report was noted.

36/13 SUPPORT SERVICES (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Assistant Director of Commissioning (BDC) presented the report which had been produced by the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) at the request of the Joint Committee to provide a picture of the current position and to show who was providing what.

Most arrangements had been in place since the start of the partnership and the main observation was that they had never been reviewed and there were no Service Level Agreements in place. The proposal was therefore, to arrange a review to ensure that the Partnership was getting what it needed at the right price.

Members were in agreement that the arrangements needed to be reviewed to ensure that the Partnership was getting value for money.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) the report was noted; and
- (2) the Operation Improvement Board be instructed to undertake a full review of ARP's support services aligned to the development of a full business case on the future governance of ARP.

37/13 BALANCE SCORECARD (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Director (FH&SEBC) presented the report on behalf of the Deputy Chief Executive (ECDC).

Part of the Strategic Review was to compare the Partnership's performance against other Authorities. The Balanced Scorecard provided a holistic picture. A sample 'dashboard' was provided on page 34 which gave a single glance indication of four measures. On page 35 the summary compared month by month to the previous year's performance. It was possible to drill down through the information to show trends. The report was a sample to give Members a chance to provide feedback. In future the report would be presented quarterly.

Benchmarking data had been received from CIPFA. Data was

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collected from about 100 Authorities. The Chief Financial Officers were going through the data to get an understanding of what it meant. At the next Committee meeting a high level report on Benchmarking would be presented. It would give evidence of how the Partnership was doing; where it was performing well and which areas needed to be addressed.

Understanding the links between the four areas of the scorecard was very important. The data brought all the information together. The Customer Satisfaction Survey would give really good information to help make informed decisions.

The Chairman and Members congratulated the Deputy Chief Executive (ECDC) on his report.

It was clarified that the CIPFA fee covered one year of data. It would be worth doing every two to three years as it would take some time to analyse the data.

The dashboard when fully populated would use the traffic light system for display, with white where no data was available. It was pointed out that the current colouring made it difficult to read and Officers agreed to address that issue. Members were otherwise very supportive of the format. In time the report would replace the current performance report, in the meantime both would be on the agenda.

The Head of ARP noted that the Customer feedback would not be available in time for the next meeting but all other data should be.

RESOLVED to

- (1) note the progress with the introduction of benchmarking and balanced scorecard; and
- (2) receive a further update at the next meeting.

38/13 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME - POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR APPEALS (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Support Manager presented the report and highlighted the differences since the introduction of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Previously Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit appeals had been treated the same and had gone to one tribunal. Since April 2013 two submissions were required. A new Policy was therefore needed.

It was noted that point 6.12 of the Policy should read ‘...can be made on a point of law...’. Subject to that amendment it was

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the changes to the current procedures; and

- (2) approve the policy and procedure.

39/13 WELFARE REFORM (AGENDA ITEM 10)

Councillor Everitt had been asked to attend the Oxford City Pilot Scheme for Universal Credit which he had found interesting and informative. He updated Members on the notes that he had taken.

There were five other pilots across the country covering different demographics. Oxford had a team of five; a manager and four staff. One and a half of those posts were funded by the DWP. They had enlisted the help of partners to assist in the transition, including Skill UK, CAB, Job Centre Plus, Aspire and the colleges in the town.

As people had less money, Pay Day Loan Companies and doorstep lending were increasing. Oxford had worked hard to contact the 'harder to reach' people to advise them of the cost implications, using a Government initiative to identify them.

With regard to the 'bedroom tax' and how it would affect people, the vast majority had indicated that they were happy to pay the extra rather than move. People affected by the cap had been encouraged to engage more with the relevant departments. In some cases the reduction was as much as £250 per week.

The barriers to working with the hard to reach had been identified as debt (very bad debt); their perceived lack of employability; security of tenure and child care costs.

Organisations should be realistic when advising customers and encouraging them to enter employment and/or get other family members to contribute. Policies on arrears should be flexible, especially during the early days.

Forums had been held for landlords to alert them to the new Direct Payments. The banking industry had been trawled to find which were amenable to tenants having bank accounts as individuals had to have a bank account to pay by direct debit. Barclays had been the most helpful.

One third of tenants had managed the new system, one third had needed help and one third were really not suited to the system. It was not known what the Government would do about them.

The project lessons were:

- Income recovery needed to be supportive rather than transactional
- Conversion takes a long time and people prefer to be able to speak to someone they know if they have problems

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- Setting up direct debits led to increased costs
- Good customer service was key
- Tenants' ability to pay bedroom tax was better than expected
- Gather as much information about tenants as possible for future use
- Prevention was better than reaction. Once people were in the system it was easier to collect money.
- DWP advised that there would be face-to-face contact rather than the new system being solely on-line.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Everitt for his update.

Councillor Ray asked what impact Universal Credit would have on the ARP if it was all to be administered by the DWP.

The Head of ARP advised that things had changed from the initial start-point which was to be totally digital. Central Government now understood that there needed to be a change in culture first and that people would need help with the migration.

The Local Support Services Framework had been issued earlier in the year setting out the partnership with Local Government to deliver the initial stage and help with migration. Different layers of help were needed. Some people would not need any whereas others would require a home visit.

Councillor Moakes asked if collection rates were falling as a result of the changes and was advised that the initial picture was that people were paying and setting up direct debits. Early indications were good, but feedback suggested that those authorities that had set the cap higher were not having such success. A lot of authorities were having to employ additional staff.

The report was noted.

40/13 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The arrangements for the next meeting on 12 December 2013 were noted.

Dates for 2014 meetings were also noted.

41/13 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 13)

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.

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42/13 PARTNERSHIP WORKING (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The Head of ARP presented the report which outlined further money saving opportunities by sharing officers and services to produce economies of scale. A business case was attached at Appendix A.

Members unanimously supported the proposals.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) Option 1 in the business case be approved; and

RECOMMEND TO THE PARTNER AUTHORITIES that the third recommendation in the report be approved.

43/13 STRATEGIC REVIEW - OUTLINE BUSINESS CASE (AGENDA ITEM 15)

The Assistant Director for Commissioning (BDC) presented the report. The outline business case was due to be presented to the Committee and it was very near completion but one issue was yet to be resolved.

As that issue had sizeable implications and was fundamental to the financial viability of the business case additional work had been commissioned to address the matter. It was likely that an emergency Joint Committee meeting would be needed when that work was completed.

Members discussed the implications and unanimously accepted the recommendation.

RESOLVED to note the report.

44/13 URGENT BUSINESS

The Assistant Director of Commissioning (BDC) advised Members of a direct approach by another authority.

Following discussions about the proposals and their implications it was agreed by seven out of eight Members that the recommendation should be supported.

RESOLVED that a full Business Case be developed.

The meeting closed at 4.00 pm

CHAIRMAN