

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, 28 February 2008 at 4.00 pm in the
Level 8, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford

PRESENT

Mr P.D. Claussen (Chairman)	Mr E. Stewart
Mr S. Edwards	Mr G. Wilson
Mr W.H.C. Smith	

In Attendance

Mr Alex Colyer	- Executive Director of Finance
Mark Finch	- Chief Accountant (Breckland)
Sharon Jones	- Revenues Benefits Manager
Steve Knights	- Revenues Strategic Manager
Rod Urquhart	- Revenues Performance Manager
Paul Calkin	- Strategic Director (Transformation) (Breckland)
Ian Vargeson	- Democratic Services Manager (Breckland)
Kate Dann	- Principal Benefits Officer (ARP)
Rick Steeles	- Principal Revenues Officer (ARP)
Rachel Beswick	- Senior Accountant (Breckland)
Lynda Pope	- Head of Finance (Forest Heath)

Action By

1/08 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 December 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2/08 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Mr P Cresswell and Mr T Holden.

3/08 PERFORMANCE REPORT AS AT 31 JANUARY 2008 (AGENDA ITEM 5)

The Joint Committee welcomed Rick Steeles, Principal Revenues Officer and Kate Dann, Principal Benefits Officer, to the meeting.

The Revenues Performance Manager presented the report on performance as at 31 January and as circulated. He highlighted the current figure for the number of fraud investigations in Breckland, which had fallen below the profile for the indicator. A report was being prepared on this matter. Otherwise performance against BVPIs for the time of year was good. As far as Forest Heath was concerned, the collection of Council Tax was shown as "amber" status. An increased number of instalments had meant that more direct debit payments were being made and the figure was also affected by a number of new

Action By

properties added to the Council Tax list. In reply to a question from a Member, the Revenues Strategic Manager pointed out that £275,000 remained to be collected in March and there was a £46,000 debt outstanding for February. Officers were not unduly concerned by the "amber" status and recognised that profiling might need to be adjusted.

The Joint Committee noted that the figure for the number of fraud investigations in East Cambridgeshire fell within "red" status for the reporting month. The Revenues Benefits Manager commented that numbers of prosecutions and sanctions were more relevant than numbers of investigations and that the target was changing in any event. She went on to explain the benefits of a new software package which required fewer staff and the Revenues Strategic Manager mentioned future resource implications of growth. It was agreed that the "red" status be accepted, but be subject to a watching brief and that the resource requirements for the Partnership be reviewed annually.

4/08 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE STATEMENT TO 31ST JANUARY 2008 (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The statement of current performance against budget was circulated and presented by the Senior Accountant (Breckland). She pointed out that the variance to the Employee budget was caused by long term sickness and that the under-recovered income to budget related to course fees, conference facilities and room hire. She also pointed out that the share of underspend to partners, as printed, was incorrect and that the figures should in fact have been 34% for Forest Heath and 66% for Breckland.

Reports would be produced in future to correspond with ARP meetings and, in response to a request, it was agreed that lists of underspends would be produced at year end.

5/08 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2006-07 ARP JOINT COMMITTEE - UN-AUDITED DRAFT (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The following points were highlighted by the Senior Accountant:

Provision of Year End Accounts Work -

- The accounts in 2005/06 had been compiled by a consultant and this year the same consultant had been brought in to guide the process; however, full working papers had been generated in-house to assist in the year end process for future years.
- The accounts had been audited and the audit letter was expected to be drafted shortly.
- The control accounts for 2007/08 were planned to be carried out whilst working through the year end work for Breckland's Statement of Accounts. The notes and investigations into points of detail would be left till after the Breckland accounts had been passed to audit. This was necessary to afford the right time and resource to the ARP Joint Committee accounts preparation.

Action By

Financial Interpretation –

- The Revenue Account to 31st March 2008 showed a 15% increase in net expenditure, 8% of which was accounted for in relation to the £208,050 setup costs incurred for the advance work in facilitating East Cambridgeshire to join the partnership from 1st April 2008
- The apportionment of this expenditure used the 66:34 split between Breckland and Forest Heath. (Note 50% of the setup costs were apportioned to E Cambs.)
- The debtors and creditors in the balance sheet net off to create a nil net worth position as there were no fixed assets or bank balances attributable to the Joint Committee
- The increase in cash outflow was 8% as per the cash flow statement

Corrections to Draft –

- Page 15 - The remuneration note 10 was incorrect and should read “There were no employees with total remuneration greater than £50,000. Total remuneration is taken to include all earnings and expenses chargeable to UK Income Tax. Pension contributions are excluded.”
- Pg 23 – The Statement of Internal Control had been adjusted in relation to the role title of the sign-off to read ‘Strategic Partnership Manager...’ instead of ‘Acting Chief Executive...’

The un-audited draft Statement of Accounts for the financial year ended 31 March 2007 was noted.

6/08 MANAGEMENT SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The report was presented by the Revenues Strategic Manager, who asked the Joint Committee whether Members wished to seek independent advice on the legal and contractual elements, or would be happy for the respective authorities’ solicitors to look at the subject matter. Members felt that reference to the respective legal services departments would be perfectly adequate.

In reply to a question as to whether the plan was sufficiently robust, the Revenues Strategic Manager pointed out that performance was in fact tied in with the Partnership’s Service Plan.

A couple of grammatical errors in the document required correction. A Member was pleased to note that the agreement incorporated an annual training needs analysis and also hoped that the proposals in relation to Quality Assurance and Monitoring would incorporate a quality assurance system.

It was noted that the section on Pricing omitted the previously agreed figure for the annual fee.

It was pointed out that details of line management and all related issues (sick pay, disciplinary procedures etc.) needed to be covered.

Action By

In reply to a question, the Revenues Strategic Manager said that the agreement would be reviewed and updated annually.

RESOLVED that, subject to the incorporation of the changes referred to above, and confirmation of the text by the respective authorities' legal teams, the service level agreement be accepted.

7/08 REPORT ON CHANGES TO THE DWP HOUSING BENEFIT SECURITY DIVISION/INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS DIRECTORATE RETURN (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Revenues Performance Manager sought approval from the Joint Committee for the release of funds awarded from the Department of Works and Pensions to each member authority of the Partnership to enable the HBSD/IAD single scan to be implemented. Agreement was sought in principle to "one off" funding by pooling the awards to the authorities.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the release of the funds be approved to enable payment of the relevant costs to be made and to meet the legislative framework set by the Department of Works and Pensions; and
- (2) the Revenues Performance Manager present a further report showing the costings for the project for information.

8/08 ARP NATIONAL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Joint Committee noted that the Department of Works and Pensions had yet to provide the baseline calculation for the national indicator (changes in housing benefits/council tax benefit entitlements within the year) and it was therefore not possible to approve the 2008/09 performance indicators at this stage.

RESOLVED that

- (1) The 2008/09 performance indicators for the partnership be approved, subject to confirmation from the Department of Works and Pensions of the baseline calculation for the new indicators; and
- (2) delegated authority be given to the respective Section 151 Officers of the three authorities to set the new target.

9/08 DOCUMENT RETENTION POLICY (AGENDA ITEM 11)

RESOLVED that the Document Retention Policy, as circulated, be approved.

Action By

10/08 LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The Revenues Benefits Manager explained that three of a series of meetings to discuss and explain the Local Housing Allowance remained to be held before the new procedure came into effect, in April. A series of leaflets was available and a guidance booklet (plain English version) would be available for Councillors in the third week in March.

In reply to a question from the Chairman, the Revenues Benefits Manager believed that the scheme was self explanatory, but she would be perfectly willing to talk to all or any of the partner authorities on request. It was agreed that it was important for Councillors to understand this new development.

11/08 LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE - POLICY REVIEW (AGENDA ITEM 13)

A number of policies needed to be adapted to take account of the new Local Housing Allowance. This was a major change in benefit provision and necessitated amendments to a number of policies which needed to include reference to the scheme.

Copies of the policies, showing the suggested amendments to the existing text, were tabled.

The changes proposed to the policies were purely to take account of the new provisions and otherwise involved no variation of policy. These changes were within the remit of the Joint Committee and would be brought to the attention of the partner authorities through the reference of the minutes of this meeting to them.

RESOLVED that the proposed amendments be accepted in respect of the ARP policies in respect of:

- Appeals and procedure
- Debt management recovery
- Discretionary housing payment
- Methods of benefits payments
- Overpayments
- Counter fraud
- Right off
- Post opening
- Staff training and development
- Code of conduct and safety.

12/08 ITEMS FOR NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 14)

It was agreed that the agenda for the next meeting should include a report on performance and a progress report on the Local Housing Allowance.

13/08 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 15)

RESOLVED that

- (1) The next meeting take place at 4pm on Wednesday 21 May 2008 at Breckland House, Thetford; and
- (2) a list of future dates be presented to the next meeting for consideration.

Action By

The meeting closed at 5.32 pm

CHAIRMAN