

**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, 11 March 2010 at 4.00 pm in the**  
**Innovations Centre, Croxton Road, Thetford**

**PRESENT**

Mr P.D. Claussen (Vice-Chairman)	Mr E. Stewart (Chairman)
Mr S. Edwards	Mr G. Wilson
Mr. J. Humphreys	Mr. D. Ablett
Mr W.H.C. Smith	

**In Attendance**

Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Kate Dann	- Principal Benefits Officer (ARP)
Carol Dunne-Bathurst	- Revenue Accountant
Mark Finch	- Head of Finance
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Trevor Holden	- Chief Executive
Sharon Jones	- Strategic Manager (ARP)
Mrs Wendy Turner	- NNDR Manager
Rod Urquhart	- Support Services Manager
Lesley Walker	- Principal Income Officer
Julie Britton	- Senior Committee Officer
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer

**1/10 INTRODUCTION**

The Chairman welcomed those present.

He congratulated Wendy Turner (Business Rates Manager) on her impending retirement after 23 years service.

The Performance Manager circulated copies of a Members' Information Pack which would be reviewed at the next meeting.

**2/10 MINUTES**

A Member asked if the additional information required at Minute No 58/09 was available and was advised that the new Service Plan had been prepared but was not on the agenda. It would come to the next meeting.

The same Member asked if the benchmarking for the ARP Structure Review, at Minute No 65/09, had commenced. The Performance Manager advised that work had started through the Value for Money Review and that more information would be provided at the next meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**Action By**

**Action By**

**3/10 APOLOGIES**

Apologies had been received from Mr D Burnip. It was noted that Mr A Claydon would be arriving late.

**4/10 URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

**5/10 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

No declarations were made.

**6/10 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)**

(a) Operational Performance

The report was presented by the Support Services Manager.

The February figures had been e-mailed out that morning and paper copies were circulated.

One area of concern was the reduction in Direct Debit payments. This was an annual problem when Direct Debits arrangements were cancelled and then re-arranged once the new bills went out. This might be due to a lack of trust.

February Council Tax collection figures were also down. Forest Heath had had a significant shortfall in January. Strenuous efforts were being used to encourage payment, including text and e-mail reminders, direct contact to arrange payments and the use of Bailiffs.

The Principal Income Officer noted that the team were working extremely hard to get payments this financial year to avoid hardship at the start of the next. The Strategic Manager had been interviewed on local radio and had stressed the importance of paying and the consequences of not paying.

There was a difference between those that could not pay and those that would not pay. At the next meeting the Hardship Policy would be looked at and the criteria for relief would be reviewed.

In the cases of those that would not pay, Forest Heath was working hard to secure bankruptcy proceedings and, depending on the court timetable, it was hoped to have had some successes by the end of the financial year. They would then be seeking extensive publicity about the hard line being taken for non-payment across all three Local Authorities.

All other indicators were green.

It was clarified that the units at NI 181 were days and at BEN2 related to the number of claimants. There had been a huge increase in the number of benefits claimants and it was not known if this was as a result of pressure to pay Council Tax bills.

It was hoped that figures would be available for the next meeting, from

the DCLG, to provide comparison with other authorities nationwide.

There was some confusion about the reduction in arrears figures and it was agreed that the format would be changed to make the relationship between amounts and percentages clearer in future.

A Member asked if the closing figures had been calculated and the Support Services Manager agreed to mail them out to all Committee Members the next day.

The report was noted.

(b) Financial Performance as at 31/01/2010

The report was presented by the Head of Finance, Breckland Council.

Expenditure had been higher than the budget across all categories due to workload increases, but this had been offset by the additional income generated from work with other authorities, etc.

The report was noted.

**7/10 ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2008-09**

The Head of Finance, Breckland Council, apologised for the lateness of presenting the Statement of Accounts. Audit issues had caused the delay and in future unaudited accounts would be presented to the Committee in June. A different auditor had been used this year and the Annual Governance Report showed the adjustments made during the audit process.

Net expenditure (page 28) had increased over the previous year but without much impact on the authorities and there was about £20,000 remaining in the reserves. Notes on pages 33 and 34 helped to explain the terms used in the report.

It was pointed out that the Fixed Fee payment on page 22 should refer to *East* Cambridgeshire.

**RESOLVED** that:

- (1) the audited statement of accounts be approved; and
- (2) the annual governance statement be approved.

**8/10 ARP VALUE FOR MONEY REVIEW**

Paul Byrne, Consultant for Forest Heath, had intended to give a Powerpoint presentation. Due to space restrictions this was not possible. Hard copies of the presentation were circulated.

Mr Byrne explained the methodology used and the way that costs had been calculated in reaching the conclusions set out in the report. He considered that the Partnership was in a reasonably healthy position but that there was room for improvement. The aspiration should be to move from having below average costs, to having significantly below average costs.

**Action By**

Rod Urquhart

**Action By**

It was pointed out that performance was a key area for consideration in comparison to costs and that efficiency did not appear to have been taken into account. The Partnership would not want to reduce standards and needed to balance service with costs.

Mr Byrne considered that there was a generally positive performance picture and that an expanded Partnership could deliver about 5% savings and other improvements could be factored in.

Concern was raised about the benchmarking information used, as this did not provide a 'like for like' comparison. The Partnership had been created to provide savings; if compared to individual authorities, each with their own costs, some form of abatement was needed to reflect the reduction in overheads. Conversely they were three relatively small district councils being compared to some very big authorities with the ability to cut costs by scale.

The Strategic Manager noted that staff capacity for working outside the Partnership had not been considered. This would impact on the staffing costs which would be lower than they appeared. She was also concerned that the Partnership's figures for 2008/09 (at the height of the recession) were being compared to figures from two years ago.

The Strategic Director (Resources) said that the report took other variables into account and there was a trade-off between costs and performance. The Partnership had to perform against both large and small organisations. There was the need to show an efficiency agenda and that was what was behind the Value for Money review. Issues could not be taken in isolation. The Partnership management team would now work on the opportunities outlined in the report and provide regular updates to the Committee.

A Member asked who would take responsibility for the work. It was felt that a specific person needed to be designated to focus on taking the ARP forward.

The Strategic Manager was already engaged on work assessing expansion capability (in relation to caseload, rather than additional partners) and she would try to bring a report on this to the next meeting.

Sharon Jones

The Chairman concluded by thanking Mr Byrne for a good report and requested a forward plan with responsibilities allocated, for the next meeting.

The report was noted.

**9/10 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE REPORT AND AUDIT PLAN**

The Head of Finance, Breckland Council presented this report which showed the results of the Statement of Accounts and the retrospective audit plan for the year.

**RESOLVED** to note the five points at page 43 of the agenda.

**Action By**

**10/10 DEPARTMENT OF WORKING PENSIONS ADMINISTRATION FUNDING UPDATE**

The Principal Benefits Officer (ARP) presented the report which requested the release of funding already allocated to the partner authorities from the Department of Working Pensions. The funding would be paid in 12 monthly instalments.

The money, which was for the sole purpose of benefits administration, would continue to be used to fund two full time temporary benefit assessors and an admin officer to support the service and maintain the current level of service.

Approval was also requested to use some of the money to employ temporary agency staff for three months, to back-fill two assessment staff, an admin officer and a team manager, to utilise existing staff to implement new procedures to improve claims assessment.

It was further proposed that £40,000 be invested in additional computer software which would bring in longer term savings within the Partnership. The new system, which was currently being piloted at Glasgow and Lambeth councils, would reduce the level of verification required on a claim, dependant upon its 'risk' and identify real time savings. The cost covered the purchase price of the software and its first year's maintenance. Future years could be self funded by the release of staff time.

The Chairman was concerned at the proposal to use untried software. However, the Support Services Manager explained that the provider (Sunguard) was known to them, as the Partnership already used another piece of their software. They had agreed to provide a business consultant to look at the way in which the Partnership used the existing product and to provide a detailed business case for the new software. The report should be ready for the next meeting.

**RESOLVED** that:

- (1) the contents of the report be noted; and
- (2) the payments necessary from the partner authorities to Breckland Council be approved.

**11/10 ARP RISK REGISTER**

The Principal Benefits Officer (ARP) explained that she had agreed to bring an updated Risk Register to the meeting. There had been no changes and therefore no updates and so she would bring this item back to the next meeting.

The report was noted.

**12/10 COUNCIL TAX RECOVERY PROCESS REPORT**

The Principal Income Officer presented the report which gave a brief outline guide to the Council Tax recovery process.

**Action By**  
Lesley Walker

It was requested that the flowchart should be circulated to all Members.

The report was noted.

**13/10 CHANGES TO THE HOUSING BENEFIT SUBSIDY RULES FOR THOSE IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION**

The Principal Benefits Officer (ARP) presented the report which sought the release of funds awarded from the Department of Working Pensions to each member authority of the ARP.

Each partner authority was already in receipt of the funding which had been allocated to help with the additional costs for software and resourcing brought about by the introduction of changes to the subsidy rules for those living in temporary accommodation.

**RECOMMEND** to each of the Partner Councils and/or their relevant Committees that approval is given for the release of the allocated funding to the Partnership, to enable the project to commence and be completed.

**14/10 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)**

In addition to standing items, the following matters were noted for report to the next meeting:

- East Cambridgeshire Partnership Arrangement – clarification of the current position;
- ARP Service Plan 2010-11 – additional information
- ARP Structure Review - benchmarking information
- Value for Money – Forward Plan and responsibility allocation

**15/10 NEXT MEETING**

Arrangements for the Annual Meeting, to be held on 10 June 2010, were noted.

**16/10 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED** that under Section 100(A)(4) 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.

**17/10 POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES (STANDING ITEM)**

The Strategic Manager gave an update on the latest position regarding areas of partnership development.

Discussions were on-going with other authorities.

The position was noted.

The meeting closed at 6.10 pm

CHAIRMAN