

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, 16 December 2010 at 2.00 pm in the
Level 1, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford**

PRESENT

Mr F. Brown (Vice-Chairman)	Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr P.D. Claussen (Chairman)	Mr E. Stewart
Mr S. Edwards	

In Attendance

Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Mark Finch	- Head of Finance
Sharon Jones	- Strategic Manager (ARP)
Rod Urquhart	- Support Services Manager
Robert Walker	- Director - Community Services
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer

Action By

17/10 MINUTES

(a) Minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2010

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2010 were confirmed as a correct record.

(b) Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 October 2010

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 October 2010 were confirmed as a correct record.

18/10 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mr J Humphreys, Mr D Burnip, Ms L Grinnell, Mr T Higgins, and Mrs L Pope.

19/10 URGENT BUSINESS

There was none.

20/10 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

21/10 GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER - UNIVERSAL CREDIT

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report.

Much had changed since the report had been written. She listed some of the new information received:

- Housing Benefit was likely to be dealt with regionally by the DWP and HMRC. Local Authorities would not be involved;
- From 2013, Council Tax would be localised and it would be up to

Action By

- each Local Authority how they handled it;
- Housing Benefits and Council Tax Benefits – information about income would be available from all bodies. Applicants would be entitled to top up to £500 only.
 - There would be a national team to deal with fraud;
 - Pensioners Pension credits and Housing Benefit would be paid by the DWP;
 - Council Tax Benefits may stay with the Local Authority – very uncertain about this;
 - Changes to incapacity benefit;
 - Pensioners will be able to decide if they want to claim as unemployed or as a pensioner.

There were still more questions than answers and lots of unknowns.

Members were concerned about the potential DWP ownership. Lots of local authorities were on different computer systems and how these would all link/transfer to the DWP was not known. HMRC's new computer system was already behind schedule and would not be ready before 2013.

It was **AGREED** that this should be a Standing Item on the agenda.

22/10 OFFICERS' OPERATION BOARD

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report.

She said it was early days yet, but the Board was making progress and was agreeing the items to be presented to the Joint Committee. It gave Officers an opportunity to ensure that any issues were addressed and that they were all working the same way, where possible.

The report was noted.

23/10 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

(a) **Operational Performance**

The Support Services Manager presented the report. The November performance figures would be available soon.

He gave the background to the amber indicators for each Partner.

Breckland – one amber for NI181, this was being closely monitored and should be on target by the end of the year.

East Cambs – NI181 and CTAX1 were amber. More payments would be collected January to March 2011 due to the instalment system.

Forest Heath – Four ambers: NI181, CTAX1, CTAX2 and OPAY1. Factors affecting performance were the large number of new properties and the increased numbers of people paying by Direct Debit. The Benefits Overpayments situation was improving. Cases where payment was being recovered from people on Benefits were distorting the figures. Every endeavour was being made to recover other debts.

Action By

It was noted that Forest Heath's arrears figures were not as good as the other two Authorities, especially Business Rates. The Support Services Manager explained that there were a large number that had been declared bankrupt and would be written off. This would be reflected in the December report when figures would decrease dramatically. There was also a lot of money tied up in the deferral scheme. This had been flagged through the Internal Audit report and would be monitored.

The report was noted.

Members debated the targets and questioned if the criteria should be revisited. There was concern that the changes to Benefits payments would impact on Council Tax collection rates.

The Landlord issue was also likely to have an increasing effect. It was suggested that a letter of concern should be sent to Government, to lobby for changes to hold the Brewers to account.

RESOLVED that the Strategic Manager (ARP) should send a letter to Vince Cable, expressing the concerns of the Joint Committee.

Sharon
Jones

(b) **Financial Performance**

The Head of Finance (Breckland) explained that the under-spend to date was due to an increase in income and savings on rent/rates due to moving offices.

The report was noted.

24/10 COUNCIL TAX UPDATE

The Support Services Manager presented the report.

Despite challenges they were moving ahead with Charging Orders and Insolvency cases, and these were now done regularly as part of the normal process. This was a lot of work and effort but it was paying dividends. No-one had yet been made bankrupt and some customers were paying up once they realised that the action would be pursued.

The Single Person Discount exercise carried out by an independent third party for Forest Heath had received 85% funding from the County Council.

The Strategic Manager (ARP) noted that she would like to carry out the same exercise for Breckland and East Cambs if she could get the support from the County Councils. The final figures were being collected and would be used to show the County Councils what could be achieved.

The Support Services Manager said that if they repeated the exercise again they would refer incorrect claimants to the fraud department to claim costs.

Congratulations were offered to all those involved.

Action By

25/10 CLASS P EXEMPTIONS

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report.

Class P exemptions applied to properties occupied by overseas service personnel. There had been concern about the huge mis-match between the information held by the ARP and that received from the USAF Housing department. It had appeared that many properties were receiving the exemption that did not house service personnel. However, further information received from the USAF HR department and other checks carried out indicated that the number of mismatches was much smaller, as the USAF Housing department only knew of officer's properties if they had found them through the USAF team.

The checking exercise would continue, but it now seemed likely that there would be a greatly reduced number of incorrect exemptions than originally expected.

Final numbers should be available by the end of December for Breckland and East Cambs. Forest Heath would take longer to complete. The Chairman asked for a final update when the checks were all done.

The report was noted.

Sharon Jones

26/10 FUTURE STRATEGY

The Strategic Director (Resources)(Forest Heath) presented the report.

There were choices to make going forward. Opportunities might arise because of the local authority cuts. There was the potential to expand and/or diversify. Members were asked for their views to decide the way forward.

A Member asked if more information could be provided about the broader partnerships mentioned at 3.3.5 of the report. He asked what they were offering that the ARP was not.

There was discussion about the optimum size for the Partnership and other options for growth, such as regionalising or franchising.

With regard to performance, a Member considered that productivity was the key issue. Focus should be on cost per transaction, not on unachievable targets which made the Partnership appear unattractive. He also suggested that the trading platform of ARP(T) could be used to help the ARP.

Other matters discussed were procurement, re-branding and marketing.

The Strategic Director (Resources)(Forest Heath) thanked Members for their input and agreed to put some proposals together for the next meeting.

27/10 NEXT MEETING

It was **AGREED** that future meeting dates would be:

Action By

- 10 February 2011
- 12 May 2011 (Annual Meeting)
- 28 July 2011
- 30 September 2011
- 1 December 2011

28/10 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

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.

29/10 ST EDMUNDSBURY FINANCIAL CASE

The Support Services Manager sought formal support to expand the Partnership to incorporate St Edmundsbury Council from 1 April 2011.

Agreement in Principle had already been given, now approval from the three Councils was required.

A Member said that he was happy to confirm the commitment to the expansion but wanted something to show other Members what the investment would provide in terms of savings, etc.

The Head of Finance (Breckland) agreed to provide a report making the expenditure and savings clear to enable the Councils to approve the release of funding.

Mark Finch

RECOMMEND to each of the Partner Councils and/or their relevant Committees that:

- (1) Approval be given for St Edmundsbury Council to become a full partner from 1 April 2011; and
- (2) The additional Capital needed to complete the project be approved.

30/10 PARTNERSHIP TELEPHONY REPORT

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report which sought support to improve the ARP telephony system. The current system was unable to cope with the number of calls at certain times and was also restricting the number of home-workers.

The Head of Finance (Breckland) advised that the budget would require approval by the individual Councils.

RECOMMEND to each of the Partner Councils and/or their relevant Committees that approval is given to release budget for investment in the ARP telephony system.

Action By

31/10 POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES
(STANDING ITEM)

Nothing further to report.

The meeting closed at 4.00 pm

CHAIRMAN