

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, 1 December 2011 at 4.00 pm in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, 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 R. Everitt	Mr E. Stewart
Mrs A. Gower (Vice-Chairman)	

In Attendance

Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Sharon Jones	- Head of Shared Service (ARP)
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer
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

49/11 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

- (a) To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2011

A Member was concerned about the lack of progress with regard to Minute No 29/11 and the ARP becoming a hub to provide Universal Credits.

It was agreed that this would be discussed under Agenda Item 6.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

- (b) To confirm the minutes of the Urgent meeting held on 13 October 2011

The Minutes of the Urgent meeting held on 13 October 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

50/11 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence had been received from Mr S Edwards and Andrew Killington.

51/11 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

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52/11 DECLARATION OF INTEREST (AGENDA ITEM 4)

No declarations were made.

53/11 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 5)

The Operations Manager presented the report and said that good work was being done in conjunction with the Housing Team to help customers, with the aim of maximising Benefit take-up and minimising poverty.

With regard to the statistics he advised that Council Tax was proving difficult to collect in the current economic climate. All four authorities were experiencing the same problems. A review had been undertaken in Forest Heath which had uncovered some significant issues. The review would be rolled out to the other authorities.

A check had been carried out with authorities in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire and comparisons showed that everyone was down on the previous year's collection rates. A meeting had been held to discuss ways of making improvements and a number of ideas were being investigated.

In a recent consultation paper the CLG had acknowledged that authorities should move to a 12 month profile to ease the debt burden, but there were concerns that that might cause problems in the next financial year.

The Head of Shared Service advised that they were using the same methods for all four authorities with varying results. It seemed that problems were more to do with who lived in an area than what was being done to encourage payment.

The number of Benefit claimants had increased, but it was difficult to collect Council Tax from those not receiving full Benefits. The situation was being closely monitored and staff were doing everything they could to improve rates.

With regard to Business Rates a Member asked if Businesses closing down and premises being empty were affecting the figures.

The Operations Manager confirmed that they were. When a business 'went bust' the debt was written off but still counted against the statistics. Also changes to empty property rate thresholds meant that a significant number of businesses which would have previously been exempt, were now paying full rates.

The Member suggested that that was something that the politicians should lobby their MPs about as it was not a sensible rule.

The Head of Shared Services drew attention to a 'scam' where a Company paid a Charity to move into their empty premises for a short time and then leave, as properties vacated by Charity organisations were not eligible for rates. There were some court cases currently underway in response to this problem, which had not yet affected the Partnership's area.

Some further clarification of the targets and year-to-date figures was given and it was noted that the oldest document pending was five weeks and most new claims were being processed within three weeks, with changes in circumstances being updated within four days.

A St Edmundsbury Councillor was concerned at the reduction in their figures for Business Rates Relief and it was agreed that information used to publicise this in Breckland would be passed to him.

The report was noted.

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Helen McAleer

54/11 UNIVERSAL CREDIT (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Head of Shared Services provided a verbal update as the information was subject to change.

She drew attention to the following points:

- The Welfare Reform Bill would introduce a cap to ensure that couples would receive a maximum of £500 and single people no more than £385 of Benefits. Local Authorities would administer the payments, but details were not yet known.
- £13 million extra funding would be provided over four years to Local Authorities to support tenants in too large properties who wished to move.
- The Chartered Institute of Housing would work with social landlords as the DWP accepted that there were not enough small properties available and that tenants might need to consider taking in a lodger.
- From April 2013 claimants with too many rooms would receive a 15% reduction in Housing Benefit.
- The Minister was looking to see if the Discretionary Housing Payment could be extended to meet the shortfall.
- Six Pilots were being run to test key elements of direct payment of housing costs of working-age tenants across all tenure types.
- Universal Credit would be fully rolled out in 2017 and final administration arrangements would be determined by 2015.
- ICT for Universal Credit would be in place by 2013 to give a six months testing period before 'go live'. It was expected that 80% of customers would use the on-line system.
- The Pilot for the Real Time HMRC system would begin in April 2012 with all employers using the system directly from October 2013
- The software suppliers were pressing the Government for more details as time was running out to prepare for the new system.
- Proposals for the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) were being considered. Initially it had been intended to TUPEE fraud investigation staff to the new organisation from 2013 but now other options were being considered:
 - Option 1 - LA investigators employed on benefit fraud working under SFIS powers, policies processes and priorities
 - Option 2 – LA Investigators employed on Fraud but formally seconded to the SFIS powers, policies, processes and priorities
 - Option 3 – LA Investigation staff become DWP

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employees based in LA offices working under SFIS powers, policies, processes and priorities

- Option 4 – LA Investigation staff become part of the DWP as employees in DWP offices under SFIS powers, policies, processes and priorities.

The Head of Finance (East Cambs) advised that she had received information that afternoon that Option 1 had been accepted as the preferred option.

- Pensioners in receipt of Benefits would be no worse off, but the Local Authorities would receive 10% less funding so this was likely to impact on other local tax payers. There was currently no definition of 'pensioners'.
- Other vulnerable groups might also receive protection, but there was no definition of vulnerable available yet.
- Definitions for Localised Council Tax Support would be different from those in Universal Credit.
- The Select Committee had raised concerns about 'demand led' benefit being paid from a fixed, reduced budget.
- Council Tax increases above a certain limit (to be notified soon) would require a referendum. Regulations would be passed in February 2012 ready for referendums for the 2012/13 tax making progress.

No other details were currently available. A further update would be provided at the next meeting.

Members were concerned about the lack of detail and the possible implications on budget and work capacity.

After some discussion it was determined that a briefing paper should be prepared, setting out the concerns of the ARP. Ministers and the press should then be invited in the New Year to receive a presentation on how well the ARP was doing and to hear the concerns of the Partnership.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Officers should prepare a briefing paper, spelling out the concerns of the Partnership, for distribution to Members before Christmas;
- (2) The Officers Improvement Board to set a date to invite Ministers and the press to visit the ARP in the New Year; and
- (3) A presentation be prepared to show Ministers the potential for the ARP to work as a regional hub.

55/11 POLICIES REVIEW (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of Shared Services advised that Policies were reviewed annually. There were six on the current Agenda and more would come to the next meeting. She asked if Partners would be willing to delegate authority to the Operational Improvement Board to approve three other Policies.

RESOLVED to delegate authority to the Operational Improvement Board to approve Policies on Data Quality, Staff Training and Document Retention.

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A Member suggested that a schedule of Policies should be provided setting out their renewal and review dates at a glance. The Chairman agreed and said that it would be a good idea to spread the reviews throughout the year.

The Head of Shared Services then explained the key points of each Policy. Most had only been amended to include St Edmundsbury.

The following points were clarified:

- Refunds did not get reported to the Committee unless they exceeded £5,000, but S151 Officers were kept informed.
- The amount of debt write-off varied according to each Authority's Standing Orders and Members felt that it would be a good idea to have a standard figure for all four authorities.

RESOLVED to approve

- (1) the Refund Authorisation Policy
- (2) the Strategy for Take-up and Publicity of Housing Benefit & Council Tax Benefit
- (3) Housing Benefits Local Housing Allowance Vulnerability & Safeguarding Policy
- (4) Debt Management and Recovery Policy
- (5) Council Tax Charging Orders Policy
- (6) Debt Write-off Policy

It was further **RESOLVED** that the Finance Officers from all four authorities consider whether the Debt Write-off Policy amounts should be standardised.

56/11 LHA FUNDING (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Operations Manager advised that the DWP had provided additional funding to enable Local Authorities to continue to provide the necessary services to Housing / Council Tax Benefit claimants following changes to the way the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) was managed.

Additional funding of £9,364 had been provided. It was proposed that £5,000 should be allocated to procure additional IT equipment to enable further home-working and increased performance and that the surplus should be retained by the Partner Authorities to spend as required.

RESOLVED to

- (1) Note the contents of the report
- (2) Approve the payment of £5,000 from the partner authorities to Breckland Council.

57/11 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Operations Manger advised of the following changes brought about by the Localism Bill and the Chancellor's Autumn Statement:

- Additional legislation would extend the range of discounts for

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Business Rates, but early indications suggested that these would be fully funded by the Local Authority with no grant from the CLG.

- Small Business Rate Relief was also changing and business would no longer have to apply – they would receive the relief automatically if they met the criteria. (More details were awaited). Funding might be provided as additional software would be required.
- The six month holiday period for small business Rate Relief which had been due to end in 2012, had been extended to April 2013.

The Head of Shared Service said that the Operational Improvement Board had been discussing the future of the ARP and was taking advice on the best way forward. A report would be presented to the Joint Committee for approval.

58/11 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 10)

An amendment to the future meeting dates was noted. The Annual Meeting would be held on 14 June 2012 (not 7 June as printed in the Agenda).

It was also agreed that an additional meeting would be held on 25 January 2012, starting at 2pm in Breckland House, Thetford.

59/11 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 11)

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 I of Schedule 12A to the Act.

60/11 PROPERTY INSPECTIONS (AGENDA ITEM 12)

A copy of the covering report, which had been inadvertently omitted from the agenda, was tabled. The Proforma B was also tabled.

The Operations Manager presented the report and business case, which had been amended by the Operations Improvement Board. He explained that a review of the current working methods had been carried out and a number of changes were proposed to introduce smarter ways of working and to provide annual savings.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report
- (2) approve the changes suggested and to share the costs/savings as per the agreed cost/gain share ratio; and
- (3) request the Partner Authorities' HR Teams support in the minor restructure.

61/11 POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES
(STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 13)

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The Head of Shared Services advised that following the agreement in principal to pursue expansion a meeting had taken place to discuss a phased approach.

Phase 1 would be to integrate ICT only. Phase 2 would cover Governance and Performance and it was proposed that complete integration could be achieved by December 2012.

A report would be presented to the Joint Committee meeting in January, requesting approval to move forward with Phase 1.

A Member asked what the ICT cost implications would be if the Partnership decided not to proceed to Phase 2 and the Head of Shared Services explained that the costs were being met by the prospective partners as even if the expansion did not take place the ARP would make savings by continuing to provide a service to them.

She added that they had very similar ways of working and would provide resilience and additional capacity.

The meeting closed at 5.52 pm

CHAIRMAN