

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 October 2010 at 3.30 pm in the
Level 1 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

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

In Attendance

David Burnip	- Chief Executive (Forest Heath)
Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance (East Cambs)
Terry Huggins	- Chief Executive (Breckland)
Sharon Jones	- Strategic Manager (ARP)
Rod Urquhart	- Support Services Manager (ARP)
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer

1/10 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 August 2010 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2/10 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence had been received from Mr M Finch and Mr R Walker (both of Breckland Council).

3/10 URGENT BUSINESS

There was none.

4/10 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

5/10 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)

(a) Operational Performance

The Support Services Manager presented the report and updated Members on the August and September figures.

All Breckland indicators were green.

East Cambs had one indicator in amber which was against Collection of Council Tax. This had been caused by a sudden increase in the number of Band D properties. This would have a positive effect on the collection fund but, due to the instalment scheme, had a negative effect on collection figures. There had also been a high turnover of occupiers and an increase in debt. The situation was being carefully

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monitored and the 151 Officers were being kept informed. East Cambs was still expected to hit the out-turn target of 98.8%.

Forest Heath had had three amber indicators in September. The Total Recovered Overpayments had been affected by a large fraud overpayment raised against a person on Benefits, which could only be recovered at a small amount a week.

The Collection of Council Tax indicator was amber due to the large number of people paying by Direct Debit instalments until March. Other factors affecting the indicator included an increase in the number of Band D properties; a review of Single Persons Discount which had uncovered 400 incorrect claims; and a review of exempt properties (which would be dealt with under Agenda Item 11). It was agreed that in future reasons for variances would be explained in the Key Notes.

There was concern that there was potential for a concertina effect on statistics and the Strategic Manager explained that efforts were being made to counter this, whilst avoiding the forced sale of properties. She distributed papers which detailed ways to maximise Council Tax collection. They were looking at those people that 'would not pay' rather than those that 'could not pay' and would be taking action against two from each Authority. The list was being reviewed in close consultation with the 151 Officers and details were being checked to ensure that those targeted would provide the right publicity for the Councils whilst sending out a strong message to those that 'would not pay'.

The Chairman said that despite the amber indicators, considering the increased caseloads, he wished to send a message of congratulations to the team for their hard work and effort. It was agreed that the Strategic Manager would send an e-mail to staff on behalf of the Joint Committee.

Sharon
Jones

The report was noted.

(b) Financial Performance

In the absence of the Head of Finance (Breckland), the Support Services Manager presented the budget which indicated an under-spend and an increase in income.

The report was noted.

6/10 ARP EXPANSION PROJECT

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report which explained the current position of the expansion project.

She advised that Members from St Edmundsbury had been invited to the meeting but were unable to attend this, and the next ARP Joint Committee due to a clash with other meetings.

The Project Board was keeping Officers updated on progress and one-to-one meetings were being arranged with all staff to explain the new structure which would include a Quality Assurance Team.

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The accommodation on Level 5 would become vacant on 28 November. Negotiations were currently taking place to retain the office furniture already in-situ. It was confirmed that the new accommodation would provide all the additional space required. Level 5 was not exclusively for St Edmundsbury staff and would house some of the smaller teams such as Non-Domestic Rates, admin and Finance staff. Level 4 would be for Benefits and Level 6 for Council Tax as now.

A Member was concerned about the changes and transition period for existing staff. He wanted to ensure that they had every opportunity to express their concerns anonymously if they so wished.

It was explained that a number of different methods were being used to give people a choice. Staff had been surveyed electronically to invite comments (which were anonymous) and a Culture sub-work group had been set up.

The Legal Agreement had been altered to include four authorities and was currently with the Solicitors.

The report was noted.

7/10 POLICY REVIEW FOR 2010

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report which sought approval for the postponement of the Policy review for 2010 until after April 2011 when the Partnership would have expanded to include St Edmundsbury Borough Council (SEBC).

Work was already underway to align operational procedures to account for the inclusion of SEBC. It was therefore proposed to delay the review and present it to the Committee in June/July 2011.

RESOLVED to agree to postpone the review of policies until April 2011 with a view to presenting revised and updated policies to Members in June/July 2011.

8/10 UPDATE OF OPERATIONAL IMPROVEMENT BOARD

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report which informed the Committee of the issues raised and provided information from the inaugural meeting of the Operational Improvement Board.

At that meeting it had been agreed:

- that future meetings would take place approximately a month before ARP Joint Committee meetings to give time for papers to be prepared and presented to the Joint Committee;
- to introduce regular meetings in each area to provide an opportunity for Officers to respond to specific issues;
- that information on the proposed Benefits changes should be sent to the relevant Housing Officers;
- to provide a guide on the various reliefs available through the Non Domestic Rates legislation to the Joint Committee (due to time constraints this guide would be presented to the next meeting);

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- to provide information to the Joint Committee on the Government changes.

The Strategic Manager explained that there were so many changes coming from Government that it was difficult to provide a clear picture however, she read out an up-to-date list of the information available and said that more would come to the next Joint Committee.

Members discussed the possibilities of the Partnership offering its services as a hub for the delivery of universal benefits. It was suggested that contact should be made at Ministerial level to invite teams from the CLG and DWP to visit or receive a presentation on the work already being undertaken by the Partnership and to demonstrate good practice.

RESOLVED that the Strategic Manager (ARP) should draft a letter, to be passed to the Chief Executive of Forest Heath, for onward transmission to both Government Departments. The letter should be signed by the Chief Executives and one Councillor from each of the Partner authorities.

9/10 ARP VALUE FOR MONEY REPORT

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report which updated Members on the outstanding points provided in response to the Value for Money report made to the 10 June 2010 Joint Committee meeting.

The six outstanding areas had been addressed and the requirements of the Value for Money report had been fulfilled.

The report was noted.

A Member asked why the Internal Audit report was not presented to the Joint Committee. It was agreed that the report would be circulated, together with the response when it was available, in advance of the next meeting.

Sharon Jones

10/10 SMALL BUSINESS RATES FUNDING REPORT

The Support Services Manager presented the report on the legislative changes to the Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR) which came into effect from 1 October 2010.

New bills had been issued to all businesses and as a result of the changes there would be a significant amount of refunds. A letter sent to Chief Financial Officers (which had arrived that day) advised that more advice would follow.

The report sought agreement in principle to delegate authority for Officers, with the agreement of 151 Officers, to share the costs as previously.

The Chairman asked the Support Services Manager to provide the breakdown of costs for all Members, when that information was available.

Rod Urquhart

RESOLVED to approve the principle of cost share and

delegations in respect of the Partner Authorities.

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11/10 COUNCIL TAX EXEMPT CLASS P REVIEW

The Strategic Manager (ARP) presented the report on the Class P exempt review which had been carried out. She explained that Class P related to visiting services from abroad.

Work had been carried out with the USAF authorities to match data of addresses where USAF personnel were registered. A discrepancy of 1468 cases had been uncovered. There was concern that a significant number of those might no longer be occupied by USAF personnel. This would result in a Council Tax debt being raised. Although this would increase the amount of Council Tax collected it was anticipated that it would impact on the collection rate, leading to amber indicators.

The Strategic Manager advised Members that this process would be reviewed continuously in future to avoid a recurrence of this anomaly.

In future the Experian system would be used to check details and visits would be made by officers to find out about occupants of properties marked as Class P. The current backlog was being addressed with the intention of dealing with the potentially biggest debts first, ie those where the discrepancy appeared to have been occurring over the longest periods. The aim was for the work to be finished within the current financial year. The Joint Committee would receive regular updates on progress.

A Member asked if there were enough staff resources to cope with this additional workload and it was pointed out that the Government Office was looking for opportunities to provide experience for some of their staff who might be available, free of charge, to assist with this work.

Sharon Jones

The Chairman said it was a shame that this would have an adverse impact on performance. It was agreed that information would be provided on what the percentages would have been, without this problem, to compare with the actual figures.

The report was noted.

12/10 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)

An update on the Government's changes to Benefits would be provided to the next meeting.

13/10 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on 2 December 2010 were noted.

14/10 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 item of business on the grounds that it involved the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

15/10 BAILIFF CONTRACT

The Support Services Manager presented the report.

Members were informed that a procurement process had taken place to provide the Council with a more robust contract for bailiff and debt collection agents. Following an evaluation process a contract had been issued. The terms of the contract were in the report.

Concerns were raised that the terms of the contract seemed 'too good to be true' and more details were provided. It was agreed that the Chief Executive of Forest Heath would check the legal terms to ensure that all necessary clauses were included.

The report was noted.

**16/10 POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES
(STANDING ITEM)**

Nothing to report.

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The meeting closed at 5.15 pm

CHAIRMAN