

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
FOREST HEATH DISTRICT COUNCIL
EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

At the Annual Meeting of the

ANGLIA REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE

Held on Thursday, 14 June 2012 at 2.00 pm in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24 1BT

PRESENT

Mr D Ambrose Smith	Mr R. Everitt (Chairman)
Mr P.D. Claussen	Mr R Millar
Mr S. Edwards (Vice-Chairman)	Mr P Moakes

In Attendance

Lucy Burt	- Fraud & Visits Team Manager
Alison Chubbock	- Accountancy Manager
Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Sharon Jones	- Head of Shared Service (ARP)
Rod Urquhart	- Operations Manager (Support and Fraud)
Robert Walker	- Assistant Director of Commissioning
Liz Watts	- Chief Finance Officer
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer

28/12 CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN (AGENDA ITEM 1)

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Mr Robert Everitt be appointed Chairman for the ensuing year; and
- (2) that Mr Stephen Edwards be appointed Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

Mr Everitt in the Chair.

29/12 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

It was noted that Matthew Hancock MP had been unable to accept the invitation sent, but had indicated since that he would come if invited again – but his availability would be for a Friday only. The Head of Shared Services agreed to send another letter of invitation.

Action By

Sharon
Jones

Action By

30/12 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 3)

Apologies had been received from Mrs Gower and Mr Smith.
Mr Millar arrived late, during the discussion of Agenda Item 7.

31/12 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None.

32/12 DECLARATION OF INTEREST (AGENDA ITEM 5)

No declarations were made.

33/12 FRAUD (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Fraud and Visits Team Leader was in attendance to present the report.

She advised Members that information on Welfare Reform regarding fraud investigation was still limited. The DWP was to be the lead authority and with the creation of the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) it would significantly change the way in which benefit fraud was investigated. It seemed likely that one key change would be the removal of authority for Local Authorities to prosecute Social Security benefit fraud offences.

However, SFIS would have no capacity for investigating matters other than welfare benefit fraud, which left areas such as the new Local Council Tax Support scheme at risk of fraud, if not dealt with by the internal team. The decision on how to move forward would be made when more details were available.

Members were concerned about the uncertainty. The effect on revenue received from the Government was also questioned as the Partnership was judged on its actions against fraud.

After discussion it was **AGREED** that a letter would be drafted for the Chairman's signature, setting out the concerns of the Joint Committee and offering to work with the DWP to find a solution around the concerns expressed.

The Fraud and Visits Team Leader concluded by referring Members to the examples of current cases and good publicity in the National Press attached to the report.

Members discussed ways to highlight the team's successes and to send a message to the public that the Partnership was serious about fraud.

It was **AGREED** that an article would be published on the ARP website quarterly to highlight good results and stories of interest to the public.

34/12 PERFORMANCE REPORT (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 7)

Action By

The Operations Manager presented the report.

Following comments from the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) the format of the statistical information had been amended to provide more meaningful information, comparators to previous years and progress in relation to quarterly targets.

Overall the picture was good. The red indicator for Forest Heath was due to a £24,000 overpayment which had been raised at the end of the month with 28 days to pay.

Mr Edwards asked if that meant that Forest Heath would be back to green in June and was advised that due to problems with the cash receipting software that might not be the case. Currently certain types of payment could not be accepted. It was an issue that had been caused by certain updates not being installed and was being investigated by the supplier and a 'work-around' was being developed.

The Chairman said that it should be a requirement of any future partner that all basic payment methods should be available.

Mr Claussen congratulated the Officers on the results in the current economic climate. However, it was acknowledged that those results could be affected by the major changes coming through.

The Operations Manager agreed that was a valid point and said that the OIB had a quarterly review to identify issues and keep Members informed.

The Head of Shared Service noted that one concern was the difficulty experienced by customers and their choices such as paying council tax or rent.

Mr Millar raised the following points:

- Why had the collection of overpayments increased for three Authorities over the past three years but not for Forest Heath?
- What were the lead indicators which would identify trends (to give forewarning of future problems)?

The Operations Manager thought that the number of fraud cases might have affected the figures, but he would check back and confirm that. As for identifying trends, the Head of Shared Service thought that a mechanism should be devised, she would speak to the Directors and 151 Officers about that.

The Chairman was keen to have regular updates from Officers and asked for Members to be kept informed and notified of trends as they were identified.

Rod
Urquhart

Sharon
Jones

Action By

It was agreed that the methods of profiling should be looked at by the OIB and any suggested changes would be brought to the next meeting.

The report was noted.

35/12 FINAL ACCOUNTS 2011-12 (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Accountancy Manager (Breckland) presented the report which sought approval for the Accounting Statement for the year ended 31 March 2012 and approval of the Annual Governance Statement. If approved by the Joint Committee the Chairman's signature would be required.

The Joint Committee remained below the threshold for small bodies. Overall figures had gone up reflecting the increase to four authorities in the Partnership.

The Chairman asked if the Joint Committee could change its Auditors, as that might save money, and was advised that there was no choice for the current year. The Accountancy Manager would check and let Members know if they could change in future years.

RESOLVED to

- (1) approve the accounting statement for the year ended 31 March 2012;
- (2) approve the annual governance statement;
- (3) note the 2011-12 out-turn position; and
- (4) note the internal audit report and review of governance arrangements.

The Chairman signed the accounts and governance statement.

36/12 BUDGET SURPLUS REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Operations Manager presented the report which sought approval to distribute the budget surplus to the Partner authorities.

The Chairman asked the Officers to pass on the Committee's thanks to the staff of ARP for their hard work.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report; and
- (2) approve the re-distribution of the surplus to the partner authorities in accordance with the Proforma B attached to the report.

Action By

37/12 HOUSING BENEFIT TRANSITIONAL BUDGET (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Operations Manager presented the report which sought approval to spend the transitional grant received by each authority at the end of March from the Government, to implement changes to the Local Housing Allowance scheme.

It was suggested that the money should be used to recruit two additional officers; one to deal with the increased caseload and one to work on speeding up the Discretionary Housing Payments which should in turn help customers worried about becoming homeless. The costings were set out on page 59 of the agenda.

It was clarified that the additional officers would be employed on a temporary basis and that there would be no on-going costs.

RESOLVED to

- (1) note the contents of the report; and
- (2) approve the expenditure of £48,000 payable from the partner authorities to Breckland Council and the retention of the remaining £959 by the partner authorities in accordance with the approved cost/gain share ratio.

38/12 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME FUNDING (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The Operations Manager presented the report which sought authority to pool the funding received by each authority from the DCLG to meet the expenses associated with the changes to the Local Council Tax Support Scheme.

As not all the costs were yet known, it was proposed that approval be delegated to the Operational Improvement Board and the S151 Officers to authorise the necessary funding to support the project.

The Chairman enquired whether there was anyone within the Partner authorities with spare capacity and the necessary expertise to facilitate the changes and was advised that some work had started, but it was intended to recruit a Programme Manager. Other help might be required at Project Officer level.

The Head of Shared Service advised that software had been purchased to model options to see if the required savings could be achieved. The existing software system would need upgrading and that work would have to be done by the software providers.

Members agreed that the recommendation needed to be amended to include the delegation to officers.

Action By

RESOLVED to:

- (1) approve payment of the transitional grants received by the Partner authorities to Breckland Council;
- (2) delegate authority to the Operational Improvement Board and the S151 Officers to approve expenditure of the funding required to facilitate the project;
- (3) agree that any surplus be retained by the partners in equal shares in order to fund any changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme in year two of operation.

39/12 NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES (NNDR) DEFERRAL OF RATES SCHEME (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The Operations Manager presented the report which sought approval to distribute the Government grant for the necessary changes to software, staffing, etc to implement the changes to the Deferral scheme.

The new scheme meant that businesses could defer part of their Business Rates. The Partnership had taken guidance from the DCLG and had been pro-active in getting information publicised about the scheme. Some deferral applications had already been received. Monthly figures would be provided to the S151 Officers.

The new software costs were not yet known. There might also need to be some additional staffing to implement the scheme. The amount of the grant was not known either, but the Operations Manager had been advised that it should cover the costs.

The Chairman noted that St Edmundsbury had worked hard to publicise the scheme but so far only the big Companies had applied for deferral, not the medium sized ones, which he thought was a shame.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the contents of the report; and
- (2) approve the payments necessary when the funding was received by the Partner authorities to Breckland Council, and that any surplus was retained by the partners as per the current cost/gain share ratio.

40/12 UNIVERSAL CREDIT (STANDING ITEM) (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Head of Shared Service suggested that the agenda item title should be changed to Welfare Reform as there was no information on Universal Credit at the moment.

The following points were noted:

- § There was an item in the newspapers that day about

Action By

software being unavailable which might mean deferral to the summer of 2014.

- § The role of the Local Authority had still not been defined.
- § the Local Council Tax Scheme had to be approved by the end of January 2013.
- § It seemed likely that there would be a County-wide scheme in Suffolk (a variation on the current Council Tax scheme)
- § Norfolk authorities were unlikely to agree a County-wide scheme
- § East Cambridgeshire was likely to have a scheme somewhere between the two with shared consultation and communications.
- § A consultation process would start soon and the teams dealing with this in area were aware.
- § SFIS was due to manage the Fraud Team from April 2013, but due to DWP software being unavailable that might be delayed
- § The capping scheme would only affect the Housing Benefit of couples with benefits over £500 a week and single people in receipt of Benefits over £350 a week.
- § If the Royal Assent date for Council Tax benefits was not met regulations had been drawn to allow council tax support to be paid by councils from April 2013 in any event.
- § Housing Benefit would be converted into Universal Credit, on a geographical basis, with customers living in larger LA areas converted later than those living in smaller LA areas. Partnerships were to be treated as larger authorities and Universal Credit might not affect the authorities within ARP until the middle of 2014. The delay might be a good thing as all the welfare changes would not commence at the same time. With the advantage that any teething issues might be reduced before the transfer to Universal Credit in the ARP area.

41/12 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 14)

No issues were noted.

42/12 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 15)

Future dates for meetings were agreed and Members were encouraged to note them in their diaries.

In future a light lunch would be provided for Members at their pre-meetings which would commence at 1pm.

The arrangements for the next meeting on 13 September 2012 were noted.

Action By

43/12 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (AGENDA ITEM 16)

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 involved the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

44/12 PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE UPDATE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 17)

The Head of Shared Service noted that Officers were looking at the way the Partnership worked to determine the best way forward with regard to the best vehicle for ARP.

Members were concerned about how the business of ARP might move forward. After discussions Members asked the Head of Shared Service to draft Terms of Reference for their consideration at the next meeting.

Sharon
Jones

45/12 WAVENEY & SUFFOLK COASTAL ICT UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 18)

The Operations Manager presented the report which sought approval to appoint Breckland Council as the lead authority for ICT procurement for the project and recommended the budget required. Costings and a Proforma B were provided.

Savings would be made through shared officers and services and the reduction in annual maintenance costs.

RESOLVED to

- (1) approve Beckland Council as the lead authority for procurement of the ICT equipment; and
- (2) **RECOMMEND THAT BRECKLAND COUNCIL** approved the budget set out in the report.

46/12 POSITION STATEMENT ON WORK WITH OTHER AUTHORITIES (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 19)

The Head of Shared Service advised Members that nothing was moving forward at present but that lines of communication were being kept open.

The meeting closed at 3.41 pm

CHAIRMAN