

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, 13 March 2014 at 2.00 pm in the
Level 5 Meeting Room, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford IP24
1BT

PRESENT

Mr R. Everitt	Mr D A Ray
Mr S. Edwards (Chairman)	Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr D Ambrose Smith	

In Attendance

Rob Bridge	- Corporate Director (Fenland)
Lucy Burt	- Fraud & Visits Team Manager (Agenda Item 4 only)
Paul Corney	- Head of ARP
Mark Finch	- Assistant Director of Finance (BDC)
John Hill	- Chief Executive (ECDC)
Liz Watts	- Director (FHDC & SEBC)
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer (BDC)

1/14 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2013 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Councillor Smith asked what the extension to the Welfare Benefits cap (referred to in Minute No 53/13) would mean in real terms and the Head of ARP was asked to e-mail the information to Members.

Action By

Paul
Corney

2/14 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Claussen and Millar.

It was noted that Councillor Moakes had resigned and his replacement had not yet been appointed. Councillor Everitt asked that the Committee's appreciation and thanks for the good sense and input provided by Councillor Moakes be passed on to him.

3/14 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

Councillor Everitt noted that he had been asked to stand as Mayor and he would therefore not be eligible to sit on the Committee in future.

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The impact of the changes to the Committee's membership including the additional Members from Fenland and potentially Waveney & Suffolk Coastal was discussed. There was concern that numbers could become unwieldy making the decision process slower and more difficult.

Members unanimously supported the suggestion that the Operational Improvement Board (OIB) should look at the implications and report back to the Joint Committee with its findings.

OIB

4/14 FRAUD (AGENDA ITEM 5)

The Fraud & Visits Team Manager presented her report and updated Members on Fraud activity.

Since the report had been prepared some further information had been received from the DWP regarding the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS). Some workshops would be held in May 2014 and a provisional roll-out date of October 2014 to March 2016 had been given. It was still not know how it would work and how the SFIS would impact on the Fraud team at ARP (in light of the potential for staff to be TUPE'd from ARP into SFIS).

The Cambridge Fraud Hub was progressing well and the data sharing agreement was with the legal department. Joint working was being pursued with as many other agencies as possible, including work with Orbit Housing Association.

The training sessions with staff from various council departments had been hugely valuable. It had become clear that some customers provided different information to different agencies and data matching would highlight those differences.

With regard to data sharing, Councillor Smith made the comment that Breckland Council would be Public Service Network (PSN) compliant by the end of March and he hoped that other Partners would be the same. It was confirmed that West Suffolk were already compliant and East Cambs were at about the same stage as Breckland. However, the Fraud & Visits Team Manager advised that the Data Hub did not actually store information it just held tags and therefore was not necessarily an issue for PSN.

The Chairman thanked the Fraud & Visits Team Manager for her report.

5/14 PERFORMANCE REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 6)

(a) Operational Performance

This report was tabled at the meeting (copy attached).

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The Head of ARP presented the report and the first populated balanced scorecard which could be amended to suit the requirements of Members.

The first set of graphs represented a set of performance indicators which measured performance across the whole ARP. The next set of information looked at each Authority individually and included performance indicators for Business Rates and Council Tax Collection Rates and processing times for new Benefits Claims and Changes to Circumstances. The budget stipulated the amount that should be being collected and the indicator measured the actual receipts. Any discrepancies would be explained.

It was noted that some areas of information still needed to be populated with information which was in the process of being collected. Training data from the previous year would be used as a comparison to the current year.

Councillor Ray asked if the Balanced Scorecard dashboard page would change colour in future and it was confirmed that it would, using the traffic light system. Any areas of under-performance or over-performance would have explanatory notes, but the colour coding would provide an 'at-a-glance' check.

Councillor Ray noted that the receipts for Business Rates for Breckland seemed to have decreased in February although the target had been exceeded in January. The Head of ARP agreed to look into that. The most likely explanation was that a business had closed and a large refund had been paid back.

The level of information to be provided was discussed and Councillor Everitt suggested that the Joint Committee should concentrate on strategic issues and not try to micro-manage. The Operational Improvement Board would look at the details and bring any items of concern to the Committee's attention.

It was noted that not all of the Partners reported sickness absence in the same way. It was felt that it would benefit staff if a uniform system could be adopted. The same applied to appraisals and work was being carried out with HR and Union representatives on a number of aspects to create an ARP product which would take the best practice from each authority.

The Head of ARP confirmed that a large amount of data would be collected and monitored in various layers. The Committee would be provided with an overview and any issues would be reported.

The report was noted and Members congratulated the Head of ARP for successfully completing this ambitious piece of work.

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(b) Financial Performance

The Assistant Director of Finance (BDC) presented the report.

The salary under-spend had been caused by a number of high-level vacancies. Those savings had been partly offset by legal and support costs. The following Agenda item made suggestions for using the savings.

The report was noted.

6/14 2013/14 SURPLUS AND CARRY FORWARDS (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Head of ARP presented the report which sought approval to carry forward the surplus from 2013/14 and use it for the items listed.

The request to retain the additional staff was based upon their success in generating income from the recovery of benefit overpayments and council tax which far exceeded the cost of their employment. However, it was noted that not all money recovered from Council Tax went to the ARP as the County Council and Police also received a share. It was therefore suggested that discussions should be held with them to see if they would be willing to help to fund the council tax posts.

In response to a query about the term 'secured debt' it was clarified that it meant that the debt was secured against the property and the money would be received when the property had been sold. In some cases it was enough to raise a charge against the property to encourage payment.

Councillor Smith noted that no target had been set for New Homes Bonus. The Head of ARP advised that there were no specific targets by a process was being run for all Partners to identify empty properties and find out why they were empty. When it was clear that they were empty the information was passed on to a company called Capacity Grid which carried out further checks. This provided a health check. It was an ever changing picture and a robust process was needed. That would be helped by the Fraud Hub.

Councillor Smith also raised concerns about the potential increase to the establishment by default by extending temporary contracts. He was advised that only one post was close to that position and under the restructure it was a post that would be kept.

RESOLVED to approve the retention of the year end surplus and unspent grants to be held in reserve for identified future spend.

7/14 STRATEGIC REVIEW (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Assistant Director of Finance (BDC) updated Members on the

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pension position if staff were to be transferred to a Teckal company. He had met with the Pension Fund manager and it had been agreed that the transfer of Breckland staff out of Breckland and into a Teckal company would not have an effect on the fund.

However, Norfolk County Council had done some work and confirmed that the scheme could not afford to transfer staff fully funded. A lump sum would be needed. The advice of an actuary would be required to work out the cost and any savings delivered from moving to a Teckal company would need to off-set the lump sum.

The Corporate Director (Fenland) said that he had had long conversations with his Actuary about Fenland joining the ARP and he had been advised that it would not destabilise the Fenland fund but the deficit contribution needed to be clarified.

Members agreed that it was the key element left to be resolved with regard to forming a Teckal company. A decision was needed so that the Head of ARP and the Operational Improvement Board could progress the review.

The Officers were requested to provide a written report for the next Committee meeting.

OIB

8/14 PARTNERSHIP WORKING (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Head of ARP advised Members that interviews would take place on 25 and 26 March for three senior management posts. Once the Management Team was in place they would agree a draft structure for the remainder of ARP, in coordination with the Operational Improvement Board. The IT was in place for Waveney & Suffolk Coastal and it was not expected that there would be any problems associated with bringing Fenland on board.

9/14 FENLAND DUE DILIGENCE (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Head of ARP presented the report and confirmed that there were no pension issues associated with Fenland joining the ARP. Breckland was working on all the baseline budgets so that savings could be demonstrated. The due diligence work had been very satisfactory.

The IT solutions all fit within the budget limits and there were no HR terms and conditions issues.

RESOLVED that the satisfactory completion of the due diligence work be agreed.

10/14 FORTHCOMING ISSUES (AGENDA ITEM 11)

Further work on the pensions' issues would take place and a written

report would be provided to the next meeting.

11/14 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The arrangements for the Annual meeting on 12 June 2014 were noted. Councillor Ambrose-Smith noted that he would be unable to attend.

12/14 ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Director (FHDC & SEBC) noted that Councils were required to grant licences to businesses despite the fact that they had significant Business Rates debt because under current legislation there were no grounds for refusal. MPs in West Suffolk were being lobbied, but she asked if ARP would like to extend the lobbying through the Local Government Association to try to change the Licensing Law to enable Councils to refuse licence applications from companies with Business Rates debt.

Members unanimously supported that suggestion.

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Liz Watts

The meeting closed at 3.15 pm

CHAIRMAN