

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, 5 March 2009 at 4.00 pm in the
Level 8, Breckland House, St Nicholas Street, Thetford

PRESENT

Mr E. Stewart (Vice-Chairman, in the Chair)	Mr S. Edwards
Mr. J. Humphreys	Mr W.H.C. Smith
Mr P.D. Claussen	

In Attendance

Robert Barlow	- Assistant Director (Governance)
Andrew Claydon	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Alex Colyer	- Executive Director of Finance
Mark Finch	- Head of Finance
Neil Fordham	- Payroll and Reward Manager
Linda Grinnell	- Head of Finance
Sharon Jones	- Operations Manager, Anglia Revenues Partnership
Steve Knights	- Strategic Manager
Tim Leader	- Deputy Chief Executive
Ruth Littlechild	- Human Resources Manager
Kate Martin	- HR Adviser
Elaine Wilkes	- Senior Member Services Officer

1/09 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2/09 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mr. G. Wilson, Miss L. Pope, Mr. D. Burnip and Mr. R. Urquhart.

3/09 PERFORMANCE REPORTS

(a) **Operational Performance**

The Strategic Manager presented the report.

The majority of items were on target, with the exception of three Council Tax indicators (Council Tax 1, Breckland and Council Tax 1 and 2, Forest Heath), which were at amber.

The reasons for these exceptions appeared related to the usual seasonal decline in collection rates at Christmas, which, this year, had extended into January/February as a result of the economic downturn. However, there were signs of a recovery of collection rates during March and it was hoped that the year end would see rates matching the same level as last year.

Members noted the excellent performance against the same

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indicators for East Cambridgeshire. There seemed to be no obvious explanation as to why collection rates there should be so different to those for Breckland and Forest Heath, when all processes followed were the same. It could only be assumed that there were differing demographic factors, with Breckland and Forest Heath areas, for example, having been more affected by increased unemployment.

In answer to questions, the Strategic Manager explained the steps being taken to try to improve collection rates, including the use of bailiffs, adjustments to the recovery timetable, telephone reminders, charging orders through the Courts, etc.

There was not thought to be any issues regarding staff or resource capacity so far as Council Tax collection was concerned. There were capacity issues regarding the benefits resources and this was addressed in a separate report.

The direct debit campaign was being repeated this year to encourage further take-up of this payment option. It was noted that direct debit agreements also had a seasonal falling-off over Christmas/New Year period, which had also been affected by the economic downturn. However, the figures were again recovering and were back up to 73%.

In response to a request from a Member, the Operations Manager undertook to let Members have figures showing the numbers of properties by Council Tax Bandings in question, to better illustrate the collection percentage rates given in the schedule.

Sharon
Jones

(b) Financial Performance as at 31 January 2009

The report was received and noted.

4/09 JOINT COMMITTEE STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2007-08
(AGENDA ITEM 6)

It was explained that there was a statutory requirement to produce an annual Statement of Accounts for the Partnership but that the accounts had also been submitted through the partner authorities' accounting processes.

It was noted that an audit review of the Partnership was due to commence in two weeks' time and an audit opinion on the governance of the process would be produced in due course.

The Head of Finance also reported that the Auditor had highlighted the need for the Partnership to have Standing Orders & Financial Regulations but the Strategic Manager pointed out that the Joint Committee had adopted Breckland's Standing Orders. It was agreed to confirm this point.

An error was noted in the cash flow statement of partner contributions on page 30, where some figures appeared to have been inadvertently transposed.

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RESOLVED that

- (1) Subject to the correction of the partner contributions figures on page 30, the un-audited Statement of Accounts be approved;
- (2) The Annual Governance Statement be approved.

5/09 BRECKLAND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND PAY SCHEME (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The report setting out the details of the Breckland Performance Management and Pay Scheme was presented by the Payroll and Reward Manager of Breckland Council.

In noting the report, a question was raised about whether it was the intent that the Joint Committee should commence a whole review of the salary scheme, taking the Breckland scheme into account as one option amongst others, or that the Breckland scheme should be used as the basis towards replacing the blended salary scheme with a performance related pay scheme.

There was a divergence of opinion on this point. The Chairman put the view that there should be no pre-determination of the matter.

A cursory check of previous minutes showed that the Joint Committee had agreed that "...work be continued towards evaluating and implementing a performance pay scheme sometime in the future" (Minute 23/06, 30 March 2006).

Following discussion, a consensus was reached that the review should not go back to first principles but should move forward taking the Breckland scheme as a working model for adaptation / adoption as deemed best in the interests of ARP for the future.

It was confirmed that Forest Heath was the lead authority for Human Resources matters for the ARP. The Human Resources Manager highlighted the necessity for appropriate staff consultation to be undertaken as part of the process, which might affect the proposed timescale for the report back.

RESOLVED that delegated authority be given to the three Heads of Human Resources within the ARP to review the Breckland pay scheme and to report back to the Joint Committee at its July 2009 meeting, subject to appropriate staff consultation, with a recommended pay scheme for the ARP.

Ruth Littlechild

6/09 ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The report explained that, in recognition of the impact of the current recession on the number of Housing Benefit claims and changes in claimants' financial circumstances reported to Local Authorities, the Government, through the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP), was providing extra funding to authorities over the next two years to ensure they could respond to the extra Housing Benefits workload.

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Nationally, some £45 million was being made available for the year ending March 2010 as a subsidy to Councils towards statutory Housing Benefits and Council Tax claims administration. Further subsidy would be provided in 2011, although the amount was not yet known.

The amount of subsidy for the year 2009-10 for each of the partner authorities was as follows:

- Breckland - £79,490
- East Cambridgeshire - £39,669
- Forest Heath - £30,313

The report outlined the level of increased Benefits workload currently being handled, for which extra staff resources were required. The DWP funding would be used for the temporary employment of agency staff within the Housing Benefits team.

The options were:

- a) Not to request the extra funding available, from DWP and not to employ extra benefits officers; and
- b) To request the extra funding available as additional subsidy to be used for temporary employment of agency staff within the Housing Benefits team.

The reason for the recommendation was to enable the ARP to continue to provide a Benefits service at the current level of performance whilst experiencing increased workload.

RECOMMEND to each of the Partner Councils and/or their relevant Committees that approval is given for the release of the grant funding to the Partnership and that the funding received by East Cambridgeshire and Forest Heath is paid into the Partnership budgets held by Breckland Council and allocated accordingly to the Partner Authorities.

A copy of the financial report (Proforma B) relating to this item is attached to these minutes for information.

7/09 LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE (LHA) AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT ALLOWANCE (ESA) - FUNDING UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Employment Support Allowance (ESA) project was a new welfare benefit introduced by the Government, through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), replacing Incapacity Benefit. The DWP had fully funded the implementation of the project via a specific grant to local authorities.

The report explained that, following the closure of the ESA project, there was a surplus of funding remaining in the budget amounting to £28,365.

The DWP had confirmed that the authority could retain the surplus and use it in 2009-10 for the purpose of Benefits. If the surplus was used for any other purpose, the DWP would seek repayment of the surplus.

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In the circumstances, it was proposed to use the money to extend the fixed-term employment of the Housing Benefits Overpayments Officer (amounting to £25,872.03). It was further proposed that his back-filled post of Council Tax Officer be also extended for a period of 12 months, and that the residue of the surplus money (£3,350.32) be allocated to the Benefits additional staffing budget.

The options were to:

- i) note the report and approve the extension of this key post; or
- ii) reject the report and repay the surplus to the DWP.

The reasons for the recommendations were to provide an update on the project and to extend the key post as it had proved invaluable in terms of maximising income received on behalf of the three partner authorities. As the post holder was seconded into this role, his post (Council Tax Officer) had also been backfilled on a fixed-term contract.

RECOMMEND to each of the Partner Councils and/or their relevant Committees that approval is given to a supplementary budget, to be funded from the DWP, as outlined above.

A copy of Appendices A (schedule of costs) and B (financial Proforma B report) to the report are appended to these minutes for information.

8/09 NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES (NNDR) EMPTY PROPERTY FUNDING (AGENDA ITEM 10)

This report explained that the Government had provided a small grant to Local Authorities in order to cover the cost of implementing changes to the way in which empty property rates were charged to businesses. The grant was to cover software, staffing, publicity and stationery costs.

Implementation costs had been contained within core budgets, with the exception of computer software. The costs of this software for all three partner authorities had been covered by Breckland in order to comply with time limits for invoices payment and it was now proposed that this charge be split between the three partner authorities, based on the number of NDR (non-domestic rate) properties as at 31 December 2008, the date when provisional contributions to the pool for 2009-10 were completed.

It was also proposed that any balances remaining from the funding were retained by the partner authorities to allocate to their corporate priorities.

The options given in the report were to note the report, approve the payment to Breckland Council and re-allocate the balance to each authority's funds.

The reason for the recommendation was as outlined in the second paragraph above.

RESOLVED that

- (1) East Cambridgeshire and Forest Heath District Councils be re-charged respectively to cover the initial software cost paid

by Breckland Council;

- (2) Any residual balances from the funding be retained by the Partner Authorities.

Appendices A (schedule of costs) and B (financial Proforma B) to the report are appended to these minutes for information.

9/09 ANNUAL POLICY REVIEW

Due to an inadvertent mix-up in the production of this report, the item was deferred to the next meeting so that the revisions to the policy documents could be presented in a clearer manner.

Action By

Rod Urquhart

10/09 ITEMS FOR NEXT MEETING

Items for the Annual Meeting on 21 May 2009:

- Progress report on the review of the Pay Scheme

Items for the next ordinary meeting on 30 July 2009:

- Pay Scheme
- Annual Policy Review
- Performance Reports

11/09 FUTURE MEETING DATES

RESOLVED that the following future meeting dates be agreed:

- 21 May 2009 (Annual Meeting)
- 30 July 2009
- 8 October 2009
- 3 December 2009
- 11 March 2010

The meeting closed at 5.15 pm

CHAIRMAN