

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 8 JULY 2014, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor G Jones (Chairman).
Councillors G Cutting, J Mayes, T Page,
M Pope, J Ranger, G Williamson and J Wing.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors D Andrews and S Rutland-
Barsby.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Paul Pullin	- Manager of Economic Development
Neil Sloper	- Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services
Adele Taylor	- Director of Finance and Support Services

88 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S Bull and W Mortimer. It was noted that Councillor G Cutting was substituting for Councillor S Bull.

89 MINUTES – 27 MAY 2014

In respect of Minute 33 – 2013/14 Performance Indicator Outturns, Councillor T Page stated that he had asked for

clarification from Officers in respect of performance relating to EHPI 218b – abandoned vehicles removed in 24 hours.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 27 May 2014 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendment:

Insert as 5th paragraph – ‘Councillor T Page sought clarification from Officers in respect of performance relating to EHPI 218b – abandoned vehicles removed in 24 hours’.

90 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Councillor G Cutting to his first meeting of the Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee.

91 HERTFORDSHIRE LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIP (LEP) MEMBER UPDATE

The Economic Development Manager submitted a report providing Members with a factual update regarding the work of the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), including information about the LEP structure, strategic plans and potential opportunities and information in respect of developments since the last Corporate Business Scrutiny report in March 2012.

Members were advised that, in terms of resources and projects, the LEP was currently focussed around 3 corridor areas within Hertfordshire. The Economic Development Manager stated that the headline figures from the LEP funding settlement published just before this meeting, indicated a £200 million budget for Hertfordshire, of which £53.3 million was for 2015.

Members were advised that although the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) made no specific reference to East Herts, reference was made to potential opportunities in

the M11/A10 corridor and in the District, such as providing rail station access improvements and upgrades to the network to improve resilience for Bishop's Stortford, Broxbourne, Hertford East and Rye House.

Members were also advised that reference was made to later schemes, such as the Little Hadham Bypass, improvements to the A602 and A10 network resilience. There was also reference to a long term venture to explore options in relation to Bishop's Stortford as the town was in the process of accommodating significant growth.

Councillor T Page queried how the LEP was accountable to East Herts Council. The Economic Development Manager advised that the Leader of East Herts Council was one of three representatives from Hertfordshire on the Board of the LEP. Members were advised that there were opportunities for consultation with local authorities and the LEP was also accountable to central government.

Councillor J Ranger commented that the infrastructure funding appeared to be aimed at the key towns in Hertfordshire. He queried where the funding was coming from for more rural projects. The Economic Development Manager advised that the LEP would very likely defer to East Herts Council in terms of how rural funding was spent.

Councillor J Wing highlighted the difficulties of traffic through Hertford and on the A1 Corridor through Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City to Stevenage. The Economic Development Manager referred to the difficulties in travelling east to west across Hertfordshire and the constraints this posed for businesses.

Councillor M Pope referred to the £35,000 LEP funding that had been allocated to the ongoing My Incubator project in Ware. He commented that, although the East Herts funding had ceased, the project had continued and was likely to do so for many years.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the update on the Herts Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) (in advance of the LEP funding settlement with government) be noted.

92 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman submitted a report setting out the Committee's future work programme for 2014/15.

Members were advised that a further update in respect of the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) settlement could be the subject of an update report to the Committee meeting on 17 March 2015.

The Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that the meeting on 21 October 2014 might be cancelled in favour of a conversation café style budget training event. The Director of Finance and Support Services suggested the time could be usefully spent on a 'cross council, pre-budget setting' training event to prepare all Members for the Joint Scrutiny sessions in the new year. Members agreed to make a final decision on this at their August 2014 meeting.

The Chairman advised that the Leader of the Council had confirmed that he would attend the Committee meeting on 26 August 2014 to answer any questions Members might have on the 4 year strategic plan and the Medium Term Financial Plan.

The Committee approved the 2014/15 work programme, as now detailed.

RESOLVED – that the work programme, as now detailed, be approved.

93 REVIEW OF COMMENTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS – APRIL 2013 TO MARCH 2014

The Head of Information, Parking and Customer Services submitted a report that provided a summary of the formal comments, compliments and complaints received between April 2013 and March 2014. The report also highlighted the key issues, remedial action and learning arising from these comments, compliments and complaints.

Members were advised that the recommendation in respect of the updated corporate complaints procedure was no longer required as the procedure had been approved by Corporate Management Team (CMT).

The Committee was advised that no matters raised with the Local Government Ombudsman had been upheld. The total volume of complaints between April 2013 and March 2014 had increased slightly to 84 against 69 for the previous year. Members were reminded that the Authority received in excess of half a million phone calls each year.

Members were advised that the reason for the number of complaints being upheld in Finance and Support Services continued to reflect the significant increase in volumes of calls and correspondence within the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Members were advised that the number of complaints received within Waste and Recycling, Grounds Maintenance, Parking and Customer Services were higher than previously experienced. Following a review, no key issues were found to account for the slight increase.

In response to a query from Councillor J Mayes, the Head of Information, Parking and Customer Services advised that all complaints were considered by Officers no matter how they were received. Officers were however, reliant

on a complaint being received before a customer's concern could be considered.

Councillor G Williamson commented on whether enough resource was available for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service. The Director of Finance and Support Services advised that more resources of a temporary nature had been allocated to customer support and the back office, but the long term sustainability of this needed to be considered.

Members were advised that the workload had not decreased as originally anticipated, so on-going additional resources for the shared service will need to be considered, in terms of the main shared service as well as customer support staff.

Councillor J Wing cautioned against complacency and stated that some members of the public viewed decisions of the Authority in a bad light but did not complain about policies based on a resigned acceptance of decisions that were based on Council policy.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report in respect of the April 2013 to March 2014 review of 'Comments, Compliments and Complaints' be received.

94 THE REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED SERVICE – TWO YEARS ON

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report in respect of how the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service had been operating since the commencement of full operation in April 2012. The report detailed changes to the environment within which the service operated as well as setting out the future opportunities and challenges for the shared service.

Members were referred to paragraph 2.3 of the report for

a contextual summary of the scale of activities undertaken by Officers. The Committee was reminded that the shared service had been one of the first major partnership arrangements entered into by the Authority.

In response to a query from Councillor J Ranger in respect of the timescale for the introduction of universal credit in East Herts, the Director advised that the timeline remained unclear. Members were reminded that universal credit would only affect a small proportion of the people receiving a service provided by East Herts Council.

Councillor M Pope referred to the additional resources that had been invested on a temporary basis to assist the joint service due to the pressures brought about by changes in welfare reform. The Director confirmed that both East Herts and Stevenage had allocated £100,000 each in 2012/13 and also in 2013/14, as well as additional front end support in Customer Services at both Authorities.

The Director advised that one-off new burden money had been received from central government, some of which had been used to fund essential system changes by the IT suppliers. Members were advised that the workload had not yet peaked but had not dropped either, meaning that the additional temporary resources put in might need a more permanent investment as the new workloads became the norm.

In response to a query from Councillor J Mayes, the Director advised that the rate of collection for business rates was slightly higher in East Herts compared to Stevenage and residents tended to pay Council Tax slightly quicker in East Herts than in Stevenage. The figures reflected the 'in-year' collection rates and the Director of Finance and Support Services confirmed that any non-payments were always followed up.

As regards business rates, these were not set by

Stevenage or East Herts and businesses sometimes disputed the levels set by the valuation office.

Businesses also went bankrupt on occasion but Officers always did their best to collect the rates in each year.

The Director confirmed to Councillor J Wing that the way people earned an income could affect the benefits they were entitled to, for example, doing extra overtime at work or employed on a zero-hours contract could impact on entitlement on an almost weekly basis. The significant increase in workload and need for additional resources caused by this frequent need to recalculate entitlement, often for just a small or temporary change, were a concern to Members. It was acknowledged that this situation could not be addressed locally, but would need lobbying at central government level.

The Director undertook to provide a written response to Councillor Wing in respect of the split in the cost of running the Revenues and Benefits service between central government and East Herts.

In response to a query from Councillor J Ranger, the Director confirmed that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was taking over the investigation of Housing Benefit Fraud nationally. The impending transfer of these posts to the DWP meant that the capacity of East Herts Council to investigate other types of fraud would also be lost.

Members were advised that joint working was being considered with Stevenage Borough Council to ensure that the resources were in place to cover fraud investigation work in East Herts and Stevenage, particularly as offenders might be committing fraud in more than one location.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report on the operation of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service be

noted; and

(B) the Executive be asked to lobby central government through appropriate channels to review the burden caused by the frequency of recalculation of benefits entitlement when changes were minimal.

The meeting closed at 8.21 pm

Chairman
Date