

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE
BOROUGH COUNCIL JOINT REVENUES
AND BENEFITS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE
SHIMKENT ROOM, DANESHILL HOUSE,
STEVENAGE ON TUESDAY 23 OCTOBER
2012, AT 6.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor M Tindale (Chairman).
Councillors S Batson, Mrs J Lloyd,
G McAndrew and A Webb.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Scott Crudginton	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Haysey and P Moore. There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 19 JULY 2012

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of held on 19 July 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 QUARTERLY UPDATE

The Committee received a report detailing the current position in the following areas:

1. Implementation
2. Performance Reporting
3. Budget Monitoring

4. Future Challenges

Implementation

The Committee was advised that the Revenues and Benefits team had undertaken a course in telephone negotiating skills and it was requested that it be noted that the Joint Revenues and Benefits section at East Herts District Council had been the first section in the council to complete Personal Development Reviews for all team members. This would enable early identification of the team's learning requirements and allow for an appropriate training programme to be established as soon as possible.

In reply to a question the Committee was advised that the IT necessary for a shared platform was on schedule and it was confirmed that separate systems could be run for each partner if required.

Performance Reporting and Budget

The Committee was advised that new claims were being processed within 10 days leading to a significant drop in complaints from the Stevenage Housing Team and an improvement in working relationships between the teams.

Concerns were expressed over the level of turnover of agency staff and there was a fear that staff would leave before the expected reduction in workload as a result of the introduction of Universal Credits. Officers confirmed that contingency arrangements for that scenario were being investigated.

A number of graphs and tables, which highlighted the workflow and increasing number of cases dealt with by the service, were distributed about which Members asked a number of detailed questions which were answered by the Officers.

It was noted that the caseload continued to rise at the

same rate for both councils.

In reply to a question concerning collection of non-domestic rates the Committee was advised that large organisations were unwilling to sign up to direct debit arrangements over concerns about cash flow. In cases where arrears had built up a personal approach had been taken to debt collection.

Following discussion about the collection periods for Council Tax the Strategic Director (Resources) undertook to prepare a report for Stevenage Members proposing a twelve monthly collection option once the necessary details had been received from the Head of Revenues and Benefits.

The Committee was advised that the proposed Council Tax Benefit Schemes were essentially identical for each council although it was acknowledged that the results of the consultation exercise had yet to be taken into account. It was tentatively agreed that an option might be to revisit the cost allocations should one council's scheme prove easier to administer than the others.

Future Challenges

In reply to concerns about benefit income caps to the introduced in 2013 the Head of Revenues and Benefits undertook to circulate a 'Frequently Asked Questions' paper that had been produced by the Department of Work and Pensions.

Concerns were expressed that as a result of reduced benefits some people could have trouble paying Council Tax demands and it was confirmed that there would be no central fund to help those in financial difficulties.

Concerns were also expressed that staff could face increased levels of aggression from claimants as a result of benefit reductions.

The Committee was advised that the bedroom ‘tax’ could have an adverse impact on the House Section at Stevenage Borough Council as a result of the numbers of tenants wishing to downsize and concerns were expressed that some families might move into properties that were too small in order to save rent.

The Committee was further advised that the policy associated with Discretionary Housing Payments should be robust as there would be no formal appeal process. Any complaint could lead directly to a judicial review.

In reply to a question concerning the timing of the next meeting the Strategic Director (Resources) undertook to call an urgent meeting of the committee should circumstances dictate it necessary to do so.

It was **RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 7.25 pm

Chairman
Date