



**MEETING** : EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE  
BOROUGH COUNCIL JOINT REVENUES AND  
BENEFITS COMMITTEE  
**VENUE** : COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD  
**DATE** : MONDAY 1ST JULY, 2013  
**TIME** : 6.00 PM

**MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:**

**EAST HERTS COUNCIL:**

Councillors: L Haysey, J Thornton and M Tindale.

Substitutes: G McAndrew.

*(Note: Substitution arrangements must be notified by the absent Member to Democratic Services 24 hours before the meeting).*

**STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL:**

Councillors: S Batson, Mrs J Lloyd and A Webb.

Substitutes:

CONTACT OFFICER: Peter Mannings  
01279 502174  
E-mail: [peter.mannings@eastherts.gov.uk](mailto:peter.mannings@eastherts.gov.uk)

## DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

1. A Member, present at a meeting of the Authority, or any committee, sub-committee, joint committee or joint sub-committee of the Authority, with a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest (DPI) in any matter to be considered or being considered at a meeting:
  - must not participate in any discussion of the matter at the meeting;
  - must not participate in any vote taken on the matter at the meeting;
  - must disclose the interest to the meeting, whether registered or not, subject to the provisions of section 32 of the Localism Act 2011;
  - if the interest is not registered and is not the subject of a pending notification, must notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest within 28 days;
  - must leave the room while any discussion or voting takes place.
2. A DPI is an interest of a Member or their partner (which means spouse or civil partner, a person with whom they are living as husband or wife, or a person with whom they are living as if they were civil partners) within the descriptions as defined in the Localism Act 2011.
3. The Authority may grant a Member dispensation, but only in limited circumstances, to enable him/her to participate and vote on a matter in which they have a DPI.
4. It is a criminal offence to:
  - fail to disclose a disclosable pecuniary interest at a meeting if it is not on the register;
  - fail to notify the Monitoring Officer, within 28 days, of a DPI that is not on the register that a Member disclosed to a meeting;
  - participate in any discussion or vote on a matter in which a Member has a DPI;
  - knowingly or recklessly provide information that is false or misleading in notifying the Monitoring Officer of a DPI or in disclosing such interest to a meeting.

(Note: The criminal penalties available to a court are to impose a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale and disqualification from being a councillor for up to 5 years.)

## AGENDA

1. Appointment of Chairman and Vice-Chairman

2. Apologies

To receive apologies for absence.

3. Chairman's Announcements

4. Declarations of Interest

5. Minutes – 18 February 2013 (Pages 5 – 8).

To confirm the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday 18 February 2013.

6. Quarterly Update (Pages 9 – 16).

7. Urgent Business

To consider such other business as, in the opinion of the Chairman of the meeting, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration and is not likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information.

## JOINT REVENUES AND BENEFITS EXECUTIVE

### MINUTES

**Date: Monday 18 February 2013**

**Time: 6.00 p.m.**

**Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Stevenage**

- Present:** Stevenage Borough Councillors: S Batson MBE DL, Mrs J Lloyd and A Webb.
- East Herts Councillors: L Haysey, G McAndrew and M Tindale (Chair)
- In Attendance:** S Crudginton (Strategic Director (Resources) SBC), A Taylor (Director of Internal Services – East Herts Council) and S Tarran (Head of Revenues and Benefits).
- Start/End Time:** Start Time: 6.00 p.m.  
End Time: 7.07 p.m.

#### 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were neither apologies for nor declarations of interest.

#### 2. MINUTES – 23 OCTOBER 2012

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of held on 23 October 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that the ten day processing time quoted in the first paragraph under Item 3 'Performance Reporting and Budget' referred to the time taken for an initial review of a new case and not the time taken to completion.

In response to a request the Committee Clerk undertook to arrange for the agreed minutes to be posted on the East Herts Council website.

#### 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. Service Plans
5. Future Challenges

Members asked a number of detailed questions about the report which were answered by the Officers.

The Committee was advised that the underlying trend showed the number of cases being dealt with was increasing and had increased significantly since the creation of the partnership, the manpower for which had been based on the workload for the year 2010/2011.

In response to concerns that in addition to the increased workload, enquiries and caseload were becoming increasingly complex, the Head of Revenues and Benefits said that, if resources permitted, she would undertake a review the average time spent per case at the end of the year.

Further concerns were expressed about the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act and its potential to generate a large number of benefit enquiries. Both partners undertook to review their Council's contingency arrangements to ensure continuity of service to clients.

The Committee's attention was drawn to recommendations 2 – 4 in the report and advised that that the measures proposed were to reinforce the staffing base and increase resilience in the face of an expected increase in workload.

In reply to a specific question the Head of Revenues and Benefits undertook to investigate the drop off in the collection of Business Rates in East Herts.

In reply to a question about the Council Tax Support scheme the Committee was advised that there was a requirement for each Council to introduce and agree a new scheme for 2014/15 and each following year. A consultation exercise would be required should the Councils make substantive changes to their existing schemes. SBC indicated that, at the current time, it did not intend to change its scheme for the year 2014/2015.

The Committee was advised of a delay to the proposed roll-out of the Benefit Cap and it was estimated that approximately 120 claimants across the two Councils would be affected. The possible effects of the switch to Universal Credits were unknown as was the timescale for implementation. The Committee was reminded that pensioners would not be affected by the introduction of Universal Credits but that a new Pension Credit Scheme could be introduced from 2016 onwards.

The Committee was further advised that the focus of the Service Plan would be on the introduction of the Council Tax Support scheme, the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act and the new business rates scheme.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

1. The report be noted.
2. The identification of a potential growth item of £19k, as detailed in paragraph 2.3.3 in the report, be supported.
3. The request for maternity leave cover, as detailed in paragraph 2.3.4 in the report, be supported.
4. The request to re-grade a post up to grade 7, as detailed in paragraph 2.3.5 in the report, be supported.
5. The service plan be accepted.

**4. URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

**5. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Not required.

**PART II**

**6. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

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EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL  
JOINT REVENUES AND BENEFITS COMMITTEE – 1 JULY 2013

REPORT BY HEAD OF REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED  
SERVICE

6. QUARTERLY UPDATE

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

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**Purpose/Summary of Report:**

- To report to committee the current position in the following areas:
  - 1 Performance reporting
  - 2 Future challenges

**RECOMMENDATION FOR DECISION:** That

<b><u>RECOMMENDATION FOR DECISION:</u></b> That	
<b>(A)</b>	The report be received.

1.0 Background

1.1 Since the last report to committee (February 2013) The New Council Tax support scheme has been introduced, the new funding arrangements for Business rates have taken affect and the major welfare reforms operating through Housing benefit have started.

1.2 These have not been without their challenges and the report details these with the current position and future challenges facing the service.

2.0 Report

2.1 **Partnership Implementation update**

- 2.2 The implementation phase is now complete. Further significant changes will be considered as separate projects in accordance with normal operational activity.
- 2.3 Staff are now able to work on both caseloads and resources can be effectively directed where needed.
- 2.4 **Performance reporting**
- 2.5 The level of work received by the Benefits service continues to increase and is currently 15% higher [East Herts 12.3% Stevenage Borough 17.5%] than that for the same period last year.
- 2.6 Caseload has also increased since April [East Herts 0.5 %, Stevenage Borough 1.3%]
- 2.7 The demand for Discretionary Housing payments arising from the changes in the welfare reforms has also risen significantly, and has proven to be a very resource intensive work stream.

	DHP requests received April & May 2012	DHP requests received April & May 2013	% change
East Herts Budget £162 055	25	146	584%
Stevenage Budget £163 535	12	114	760%

- 2.8 The service has been focused on aligning the processing of each Councils work. As staff have become more able to move between workloads this has been more easily achieved.
- 2.9 The current performance for Benefits shows a disparity, however as the outstanding workload is now at the same date\* for each Council, the second quarter performance should demonstrate a closer correlation. Variations will be more easily identifiable and adjusted for.

*\*Work is processed in date order. Aligning each work stream means for example that both Councils Atlas files have been processed up to the 14 June 2013.*

	Average time to process new claims and changes in circumstances for Housing Benefit.
East Herts	9.41 (3 data cuts)
Stevenage	29.33 ( 2 data cuts)

2.10 The Revenues service have also been affected by the impact of the reforms and this is best demonstrated by the 50% overall increase in reminders issued.

	Reminders issued May 2012-13	Reminders issued May 2013-14	Average value of reminder in 2013-14	% change
East Herts	2885	3388	£87.55	17.4%
Stevenage	2500	4693	£68.26	87%

2.11 Those customers who were in receipt of 100% Council Tax Benefit at 31.3.13 represent 6530 (at 30.5.13) new accounts to be managed by the staff. These customers (EHC 2569 and SBC 3425) are resource intensive and are demonstrating patterns of repeat callers. Anecdotally there appears little understanding of Council Tax liability and payment requirements.

2.12 A further separate letter will be issued to all CTS customers before the summons are issued in an attempt to help them avoid the £80.00 costs. Once a liability order is secured, any account owing over £130.00 (approximately) will be sent to bailiffs for collection. This represents £80.00 costs and £50.00 arrears.

2.13 Customers have been generally confused and frustrated by the welfare reforms and are keen to express this dissatisfaction to

officers. The volume of contacts with customers is very high and often repeated.

2.14 It is anticipated that the level of customer interaction will continue to rise during the year at each stage of the recovery cycle.

2.15 Customers are not currently issued with a summons if the balance outstanding is less than £40. This will give customers paying only the 8.5% charge an extended period to settle the account. Reminders are being issued to all accounts with a balance outstanding of £6.

2.16 Both Councils are addressing the welfare reform issues corporately and significant joint working is being carried out. East Herts have funded three administrative posts to 31 March 2014, and increased the transactions managed by the councils corporate customer support team. Stevenage have increased capacity in the customer support centre to assist with telephone contact for Housing Benefit enquiries.

2.17 The service continues to rely on the support of agency staff and off site processing, and £100k was provided by each council within the budget to support this during 13/14.. External resources are becoming more difficult to secure. One offsite company when asked for assistance in April, could not provide any until July.

## **2.18 Budget Monitoring**

2.19 The 2012/13 draft budget outturn has been provided to Directors and they will be reviewing this prior to audit.

**2.20 Retained costs:** Stevenage Councils retained costs in the 2012/13 budget are currently £382,266. Following a review of these costs, the Directors are now in discussion over their accessibility.

## **2.21 Future Challenges**

2.22 The Benefit cap is due to impact on customers from the 15 July to September 2013. The most recent list (May 2013) of customers who may be affected by the Cap indicates 42

households in East Herts and 74 households in Stevenage. This is slightly less than previously expected.

- 2.23 Universal credit is still due to go live in October, but appears to be at a much lower level than previously anticipated. It is increasingly unlikely that the service will see any real impact during 2013/14.
- 2.24 The DWP are unable to provide any timescales for the transfer of claims, but are already identifying areas of work they are unable to take on in the medium term as they are deemed too complex. This includes Exempt accommodation claims.
- 2.25 The transfer of Pensioner claims into the pension service (they are not included in universal credit) may now slip to 2016 at the earliest.

### 3.0 Implications/Consultations

- 3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

#### Background Papers:

None.

Contact Members: Councillor J Lloyd (Stevenage Borough Council),  
Executive Member for Resources.  
Councillor M Tindale, (East Herts Council)  
Executive Member for Finance.

Contact Officer: Su Tarran – Head of Revenues and Benefits  
Shared Service, Extn: 2075.

Report Author: Su Tarran – Head of Revenues and Benefits  
Shared Service, Extn: 2075.

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## ESSENTIAL REFERENCE PAPER 'A'

### IMPLICATIONS/CONSULTATIONS:

Contribution to the Council's Corporate Priorities/ Objectives <i>(delete as appropriate):</i>	<b>People</b>  This priority focuses on enhancing the quality of life, health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable.
Consultation:	N/A
Legal:	N/A
Financial:	• <i>Only as referenced in the report</i>
Human Resource:	N/A
Risk Management:	• <i>Only as referenced in the report.</i>

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