

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE
BOROUGH COUNCIL JOINT REVENUES
AND BENEFITS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE
COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS,
HERTFORD ON MONDAY 26 JUNE 2017, AT
6.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs J Lloyd (Chairman)
Councillors E Buckmaster, L Radford, Raynor,
J Thomas and G Williamson.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Carol Bulloch	- Systems and Support Manager
Clare Fletcher	- Assistant Director of Finance
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Theresa Mortimer	- Benefits Manager
Graeme Reid	- Revenues Manager
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Adele Taylor	- Director

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

It was proposed and seconded that Councillors J Lloyd and G Williamson be appointed Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively of the East Herts Council and Stevenage Borough Council Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the 2017/18 civic year.

This was agreed by the Joint Committee.

RESOLVED – that Councillors J Lloyd and G Williamson be appointed Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively of the East Herts Council and Stevenage Borough Council Joint Revenues and Benefits

Committee for the 2017/18 civic year.

2 MINUTES – 15 JUNE 2016

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2016 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 ANNUAL UPDATE

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service submitted an annual update report in relation to the following areas:

- Performance reporting
- Other challenges
- Budget outturn

The Head advised that the level of work received by the Housing Benefit team had increased in 2016/17 despite a reducing caseload. The overall level of post received in 2016/17 had increased by 9.44% compared to 2015/16. There was an increasing burden on both Councils to collect an increasing level of debt as the value of overpayments continued to rise.

The Head confirmed to Councillor J Lloyd the methods being used to trace those in debt to both Authorities. She referred in particular, to information from companies engaged to trace former claimants who did not respond to previous Council communication, in order to make individual payment arrangements for those customers no longer in receipt of housing benefit. Councillor Lloyd referred to utilising all the available technology to assist both Authorities in tracing debtors.

The Head referred to training to assist Officers to use the internet and other tools without breaching Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) legislation. She referred to an onus on Local Authorities to focus on the prevention of future benefits overpayments. She also referred to an ongoing review

of the overpayment collection process being carried out by consultants with a view to increasing the in-year collection rate by 10%.

The Head stated a major challenge was Discretionary Housing Payments and Officers were presented with complex stories regarding a very challenging area of work. Officers had written to those affected by a new lower cap for payments but less than half of the 130 affected in each Authority had responded and Officers were doing all they could to assist them. The workload for both Authorities was increasing due to increasingly complex caseloads.

Officers continued to collect outstanding Council Tax and gradual improvements were now being made to in-year collection rates. Members were advised of the new Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS). Both Authorities were struggling to recruit specially qualified Officers to FERIS posts due to a general shortage. East Herts and Stevenage were losing out to London Authorities even when homeworking was being made available.

The Head advised that universal credit had gone live in the shared service area in February 2016 for a small group of claimants and for 2016/17, the Stevenage Council Tax collection rate was 96.6%, which was the highest since at least 2010/11. The East Herts rate was 98.4% which was the highest since 2012/13. This was despite increasing levels of collectable tax. The Head and the Shared Service Manager – Revenues answered a number of technical queries regarding Council Tax and Business Rates.

Members were advised that Stevenage Borough Council would go live with digital self-service on 28 June 2017 and extra modules would soon be added to the East Herts digital service. Members were advised that the single fraud investigation service had subsumed the Benefits fraud team from 1 May 2015 for both Stevenage and East Herts and new procedures for referring cases to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were in place.

The DWP continued to struggle to adjust to the changes and the level of fraud activity leading to prosecutions had suffered. The general perception was that the DWP were adverse to prosecutions and preferred administrative penalties for most cases. Administrative penalties of 50% could be applied in addition to the value of any overpayment that was to be recovered.

East Herts, Stevenage and North Herts, in conjunction with the Shared Anti-Fraud Service (SAFS), were part of a national pilot for joint working with the DWP for the joint investigation of Housing Benefit fraud where there was also a claim for Council Tax support. This placed all three Authorities in a greatly improved position in relation to housing benefit fraud.

Councillor G Williamson thanked the Officers of the shared service for all the work carried out and the subsequent positive benefits. Councillor J Lloyd added her thanks to those of Councillor Williamson. She was assured by the Stevenage Assistant Director of Finance that although the joint Committee met annually, Officers would continue to meet on a monthly basis.

Officers responded to a number of points made by Members regarding the volume and nature of complaints made to both Authorities. The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service referred to the large volume of correspondence that was system generated for issue to residents.

The Shared Service Manager – Benefits referred to the very lengthy and complex nature of the correspondence that was occasionally sent. She referred to the issue of the public understanding the correspondence sent to them. She also mentioned that in-house training might be arranged for Officers who issued ad-hoc letters to ensure they were structurally correct.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

The meeting closed at 6.55 pm

Chairman
Date