

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE
BOROUGH COUNCIL JOINT REVENUES AND
BENEFITS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE
STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL OFFICES
ON TUESDAY 4 JULY 2023, AT 6.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs J Lloyd (Chair)
Councillors L Briscoe, C Brittain, A Daar and J
Thomas

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Nominations were requested for the appointment of the Chair of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd be appointed Chair for the meeting.

It was ***RESOLVED:*** That Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd be appointed as Chair of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the Municipal Year 2023/24.

2 APOLOGIES OF ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received by Councillor Chris Wilson.

Apologies were also received by Su Tarran, Head of the Shared Services.

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES - 20 OCTOBER 2022

It was ***RESOLVED:*** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 20 October 2022 be approved as

a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

4 SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE - ANNUAL UPDATE

The Committee received a report in relation to the Shared Revenue and Benefits Service for 2022/23. The report updated Members on the performance of the service during the year, the in-year challenges and the 2022/23 budget outturn position.

Members expressed their thanks to the Officers for their work over the previous year and the way they had dealt with the various challenges over the past few years.

The Systems, Support and Control Manager stated that the teams had a busy year and both Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) and East Herts District Council (EHDC) were performing well.

The Chair asked a question relating to debt and when it was written off. The Systems, Support and Control Manager advised that the team worked through a strict recovery process. When they had exhausted all options, the debt is written off, however this process took several years.

The Chair asked a question relating to the value of debt rising and asked whether the team was managing with the staff they had and how quickly they could respond to changes. She also asked whether the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were more responsive. The Systems, Support and Control Manager advised that the overpayment team were very static, reactive and they were well staffed. She added that the responsiveness of the DWP was back on track.

Another Member asked questions relating to council tax

and council tax allowances. The Benefits Manager advised that the government allocated a certain amount of money to each Council for the discretionary housing fund budget. This was used when residents had a shortfall in housing benefits, such as rent arrears due to financial difficulties. This money was given out for short periods of time until residents can manage again. The team looked at whether to award benefits case by case. They also monitor each month how much of the budget had been spent. He concluded the discretionary housing fund was useful and helped a lot of residents.

The Chair asked why the collection rates were decreasing. The Revenue Manager advised that the overall rate was for each Council and this was then broken down by category. Those who were on benefits were struggling to achieve their payment of council tax.

The Chair suggested there should be a review of the 8.5% liability number for council tax. The Systems, Support and Control Manager advised that it would not be cost effective to change this, but it was important to keep it in review. Another Member added there was a similar review happening in East Herts.

A Member asked whether there was a report on the progress and options of this update. The Systems, Support and Control Manager advised this went to Overview and Scrutiny at East Herts, with SBC Members agreeing this would also go to Overview and Scrutiny at Stevenage.

The Chair asked how often the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) checked on the work the team was completing. The Benefits Manager advised that the DWP only checked at the end of the year when the subsidy claim was submitted, but that some fraud initiatives were always taking place. He added that the team had less contact with the DWP than in the past as a lot of things

were automated now.

The Chair asked the percentage of housing benefit residents on universal credit. The Benefits Manager advised the government were constantly migrating the housing benefit caseload. Residents in shelters stayed on the housing benefits as the government had not migrated this to universal credit yet. Residents on working tax credit were recently migrated to universal credit. The percentage of those on universal credit was growing over time.

The Chair asked whether the issue with energy bills had caused much of a problem. The Revenue Manager advised that using the government energy scheme, the team had paid 80,000 people between SBC and EHDC and around 5000 received a top up payment. He stated this took up a lot of the services resources and there was a difficulty of getting extra staff at the time, however they did receive some extra funding at the end of March. He advised the scheme proved beneficial and did make a difference. The team did a lot of verification before giving out the money with lots of data screening, checking of payments, as well as a verification exercise post closure. He noted that the team only found 4 duplicate payments at SBC and 2 at EHDC.

A few Members asked questions in relation to debt arrears. The Revenue Manager advised that the team were still collecting old debts. There was an issue with residents who had old and new debts and therefore can't break the cycle of debt. Therefore there are some older debts that need to be written off to get it down to a more manageable number. The team were aware customers were struggling and there is a monthly write off sheet where the team look at the ongoing debts.

A few Members commented on missed payments and residents who have never had to claim benefits before

who were often reluctant to ask for help. The Revenue Manager advised that Citizens Advice had seen that with residents who can't afford to pay everything, they often viewed things such as council tax as less important than other bills such as heating, therefore this is how they fell into arrears and the team have seen the numbers rise. The team worked hard to make sure residents were kept up to date to prevent them going into arrears and giving them the support they needed such as signposting them to available help. There was a monthly recovery process and the collection rates had increased compared to the previous year. He encouraged residents to ask for help early before going into arrears so they could signpost them to the relevant organisations they work with to provide help, such as debt organisations.

A Member asked a question regarding the business grants. The Business Rates Manager advised that they had lots of data from HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC) and they are happy with the grants from EHDC but are still waiting for the grants for SBC. The team reviews the grants carefully to ensure there was no fraud taking place. The Assistant Director (Finance) advised that the 2020 business grants for SBC had been signed off and they were now looking at 2021.

The Chair asked questions in relation to the digital systems and online access. The Systems, Support and Control Manager advised they were encouraging customers to use the online system and do it themselves as the digital channel is often quicker. She stated the availability was there but the take up was poor and more could be done to get the word out, however she appreciated some could not use the online systems. The Business Rates Manager added that there was an issue with businesses using the online system as many larger businesses often dealt with invoices in a central place and use agents. Other smaller businesses don't like the online system and would rather a physical bill.

The Chair asked questions in relation to vacant posts. The Revenue Manager advised in the council tax team there were 2 vacancies open for over 3 months, and 2 other part time posts became available. He added it was difficult to recruit people with the existing skills and they were having to recruit and train people.

Another Member asked whether the team offered home working. The Revenue Manager advised that the team were required to come in every 3 weeks. He noted they were competing with other councils that always worked remotely, and this was a challenge not only for this team, but across the councils. The Systems, Support and Control Manager added that the shared service had always offered flexible working since 2011 and believed it was one of the reasons the team was so successful.

It was ***RESOLVED:*** That the Shared Revenues and Benefits Service Annual Update be noted.

5 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was none.

6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Not required.

7 PART 2 MINUTES - 20 OCTOBER 2022

It was ***RESOLVED:*** That the Part II Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 20 October 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

8 URGENT PART 2 BUSINESS

There was none.

The meeting closed at 7.05 pm

Chairman

Date