

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2012, AT 7.00
PM

PRESENT: Councillor D Andrews (Chairman)
Councillors E Bedford, G Jones, W Mortimer,
T Page, M Pope, J Ranger, G Williamson
and J Wing.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors S Bull and P Phillips.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Democratic Services Officer
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Ceri Pettit	- Corporate Planning and Performance Manager
George A Robertson	- Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Adele Taylor	- Director of Finance and Support Services

442 MINUTES – 21 AUGUST 2012

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 August 2012, be confirmed as a correct

record and signed by the Chairman.

443 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Adele Taylor, Director of Finance and Support Services to the meeting.

444 LOCAL SCHEME FOR COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The Executive Member for Finance submitted a report inviting comments on the responses received to the draft local Council Tax Support Scheme which would replace the Council Tax Benefit arrangements. The new scheme would be effective from 1 April 2013. The Director of Finance and Support Services provided a summary of how the scheme would work, the full detail of which was set out in a report to the last meeting of this committee and summarised here in the supporting Essential Reference Papers. The Director of Finance and Support Services advised Members that all comments would be referred to the Executive for consideration with a final decision on the scheme being taken by Council.

As a result of the consultation exercise only 94 responses had been received to the proposed scheme. These comments were set out within Essential Reference Paper "B" of the report now submitted.

The Director of Finance and Support Services advised Members that the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) was proposing to make a £100m grant available to be shared out between Councils for one year to those authorities who produced a "well-designed" Council Tax Support Scheme. This grant would be payable in March 2013 to those Councils whose schemes met the Government's criteria, which was set out in the report now submitted. The Director of Finance and Support Services advised Members that the "agreed scheme" had to be in place by 31 January 2013.

Councillor T Page stated that the Government Grant

complicated the picture and would have preferred to see a range of alternative options prepared for the Executive to consider which included one taking the grant into account but maintaining the authority's original spending commitment. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services explained the current benefit process and outlined how the new scheme would work. He explained that pensioners on benefit would continue to receive a 100% discount and that other individuals would get a 90% discount, i.e. everyone would pay a least 10% Council Tax unless they were 'protected' pensioners. He explained that the Council had a separate scheme to protect extreme hardship cases and that each situation would be reviewed on its individual merits.

Councillor G Jones sought clarification on the potential for other options. The Director of Finance and Support Services reminded Members that the Government grant was only available for one year and of the impact this had on pensioners. She explained that the government grant would help protect the vulnerable.

Councillor J Ranger referred to the very small number of people who had responded to the consultation exercise. He reminded Members that a new scheme would come into operation the following year and of the need not to make things too complicated. He supported the suggestion of limiting council tax liability to 8.5% for everyone in recognition that, if there were hardship cases, then these could be looked at individually. Councillor J Ranger reminded Members that 'protected' pensioners would receive 100% discount.

Councillor J Wing queried the level of income an individual might earn before the Council would pay more than the minimum amount. The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service explained that it was not possible to provide a definitive response, as much depended on the individual's circumstances. Councillor J Wing queried what levels of income were needed in order to generate

maximum discount. The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service agreed to write to the Member separately.

In response to a further query, the Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Services explained that the Council paid out £7Million in Council Tax Benefits which was 100% subsidised from the Government.

Councillor G Jones queried the use of virements to maintain the status quo. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services explained that the use of a virement was not possible but that the Council could decide to absorb all the loses via the budget. He explained that any decision the Council made would impact on the amounts payable to the County Council and the Police. The Director of Finance and Support Services explained the grant implications of such a decision.

Councillor T Page expressed concern regarding vulnerable residents. The Chairman reminded Members that the Council was working with partners on the detail of the scheme. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services provided a summary of the wide range of benefit changes to be implemented by the Government on those who may be the least able to cope.

Councillor T Page queried whether the Council could levy from residents, a Council Tax insurance. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services advised that he did not know whether this was possible or legal and reminded Members about the timeframes which the Council needed to adhere to in order to receive the grant.

Councillor G Jones suggested that the Council needed to have in place an option which would cost the same amount which was consulted upon i.e. a range between 92% and 93.5% subsidy. He suggested that the Executive should be given a range of options from which

to choose - with and without the new government grant, and with and without using the full amount cited in the consultation documents.

The Chairman summarised Members' views in that the Committee accepted the 8.5% figure as a concept and urged Officers to provide the Executive with more illustrations for their consideration and in order to maximise any grant subsidy.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be advised of Members' comments as now detailed.

445 ANNUAL REVIEW OF PARTNERSHIP REGISTER

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Support Services submitted a report which provided the results of the annual review of Partnership Registers, the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted.

Councillor J Ranger thanked Officers for providing a summary which clearly showed how much work Officers and this authority does through working in partnerships.

Members supported the governance arrangements of partnerships and internal processes relating to the Annual Review of the partnership register and agreed that the report be presented to Members annually.

RESOLVED – that (A) the governance arrangements of partnerships and internal processes relating to the Annual Review of the partnership register be supported; and

(B) the report be presented to Members annually.

446 2012/13 SERVICE PLANS – MID-YEAR SUMMARY OF PROGRESS AND EXCEPTIONS REPORT

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report summarising the

Council's achievements against its priorities for 2012/13 and those actions which had revised completion dates or had been suspended, the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and supporting Essential Reference Papers.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided Members with a number of updates which had occurred since the agenda papers had been printed.

In response to the update concerning telephony arrangements, the Chairman stated that he found that from an external viewpoint, this appeared to be working well. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Service explained that there were still software issues to be resolved and that there had been three meetings with the providers in an effort to resolve the problems.

Members welcomed the report as "good news" and noted the progress made against the Council's priorities, the revised completion dates and suspensions against the 2012/13 Service Plan Actions and receiving the 2011/12 Service Plan actions brought forward into the current year.

RESOLVED – that the progress made against the Council's priorities, the revised completion dates and suspensions against the 2012/13 Service Plan Actions and the 2011/12 Service Plan actions be received.

447 MONTHLY CORPORATE HEALTH CHECK – JULY TO SEPTEMBER 2012

The Leader of the Council submitted an exception report on finance and performance monitoring for East Herts covering the period July to September 2012.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided an update in relation to planning enforcement

EHPI2.1e (status now green) and the number of complaints resolved EHPI5.1 (data value omitted from bar).

In response to a query from Councillor J Mayes about the time taken to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit and whether the Council needed more staff, the Director of Finance and Support Services stated that additional staff had been taken on to administer the increasing workload. The Director stated that she intended to review the impact of the additional workload. Councillor G Jones commented that this had been a recurrent issue and queried whether the way benefit changes were reported had exacerbated problems. He felt that the process should be more flexible. The Director of Finance and Support Services explained that the Council had been inundated with minor changes of process. She undertook to review matters and report back to Members.

Councillor T Page referred to the adverse variance in fees and charges for Development Control. Councillor J Ranger reminded Members how highly competitive the business was.

In response to a query from Councillor T Page regarding the withdrawal of work and funding from the Environment Agency, the Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services explained that it was up to the Agency to decide how they wanted their work undertaken. They had decided to roll up several small contracts into a single regional one which this authority could not take on.

In response to a query from Councillor T Page concerning the production of a Homicide Report. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services explained that when there was a homicide in the District, the Council was required to commission a special report for the Home Office.

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope regarding

the recovery of Penalty Charge Notice monies, the Chief Executive and Director Customer and Community Services provided an update on the matter.

Members noted the budget variances and performance.

RESOLVED – that the budget variances and performance be noted.

448 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report setting out the future programme for the Committee.

It was noted that there would be two joint meetings of scrutiny in January and February 2013. Members were informed that it was anticipated that Officers would report on Information Security and Governance to the Corporate Business Scrutiny meeting on 19 March 2013 when that meeting would also receive a progress report following recent agreement for the corporate website action plan. The Scrutiny Officer also advised Members that training for the committee's new governance role in respect of information security needed to be programmed in to the new civic year. This was noted and agreed.

Councillor J Wing referred to the issue of Section 106 Agreements and their administration, which had more recently been discussed at Audit Committee. The Chairman undertook to liaise with the Chairman of Audit Committee on this matter.

Members noted and supported amendments to the Work Programme.

RESOLVED – that the Work Programme, as amended, be approved.

The meeting closed at 8.50 pm