

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
EAST HERTS COUNCIL AND STEVENAGE
BOROUGH COUNCIL JOINT REVENUES
AND BENEFITS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE
ROOM 27, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 28 JANUARY 2014, AT 6.00 PM

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

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors P Ruffles.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Scott Crudgington	- Strategic Director (Resources)
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Adele Taylor	- Director of Finance and Support Services

7 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors J Thornton and M Tindale. It was noted that Councillor G McAndrew was substituting for Councillor M Tindale.

8 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman thanked East Herts Council for hosting the meetings of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee during the 2013/14 civic year.

9 MINUTES – 21 OCTOBER 2013

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2013 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

10 QUARTERLY UPDATE

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

- Performance reporting
- Budget 2014/15
- Service Plans for 2014/15
- Performance Targets 2014/15
- Future challenges

Members were advised that the Autumn Statement had included various changes to be introduced from April in respect of Business Rates. Officers had also received information relating to the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and an outline of Council Tax changes.

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service advised that the workload of the Benefits Service had continued to substantially increase albeit at a reduced rate during the third quarter. Council Tax Support caseloads had also slightly reduced although overall caseloads had remained relatively stable.

Members were advised that, in conjunction with the increased caseload, the transactions per claim had increased and Officers had attributed the majority of this increase to individuals' changes in tax credits, which might change frequently if someone was working different hours and/or overtime every week or month. Members were also advised that, due to the changes in welfare reforms, the demand for discretionary housing payments had also risen significantly and this had proven to be a very resource intensive workstream.

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service stated that following a court decision, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had issued revised instructions in November that narrowed the definition of a child that could qualify for a separate bedroom due to disability.

Officers had contacted the households which would be worse off by this ruling and had advised them of the availability of Discretionary Housing Payments to support the transition. The DWP had also issued revised instructions in January 2014 in relation to customers who might be exempt from the under occupation rule if they had been continuous tenants in receipt of an unbroken award of Housing Benefit entitlement since 1996. Officers would be engaging with the External Auditors in respect of the appropriate action for the Joint Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Members were advised that performance in respect of NI181 had shown a substantial improvement since October 2013 and the table at paragraph 2.3.4 of the report submitted, detailed the current performance figures. Officers anticipated that, pending the availability of resources, performance should continue to improve.

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service advised that the benefit cap was now running as a 'regular' feature of the Benefits scheme and the number of customers remained small at approximately 35 – 40 per Authority.

Members were referred to paragraph 2.6.6 as well as Essential Reference Paper 'B' for information in respect of the 2014/15 draft budget. An extensive list of performance information had been collected for the joint service and each Authority had reported a different selection of these indicators and the proposed targets for these published targets was detailed at paragraph 4.1 of the report now submitted.

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service summarised the future challenges for the Shared Service and Members were reminded of the changes that were due in respect of Council Tax, in particular, the proposals to introduce a nationwide 50% discount for Annexes occupied by a family member from April 2014.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

11 HOUSING BENEFIT DATA SHARING

The Stevenage Strategic Director (Resources) submitted a report updating Members on the ability of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service to share Housing Benefit customer data with other services at Stevenage Borough Council.

Members were advised that 3 areas had been identified where data could be shared, as detailed in Essential Reference Paper 'B' to the report now submitted. Officers would work proactively where a Stevenage service made a request to work with the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service.

Members were advised that Officers would prepare a draft of the data sharing protocol with a final version anticipated in April 2014. The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that (A) the current position regarding the sharing of data between the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service and other Stevenage Borough Council services be noted; and

(B) the plans for the introduction of a data sharing protocol be noted.

The meeting closed at 6.55 pm

Chairman

Date