

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

JOINT EXECUTIVE REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED SERVICE COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 25 June 2020

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Virtual (via Zoom)

Present: Stevenage Borough Council:
Councillors Mrs Joan Lloyd, Lloyd Briscoe and Jeannette Thomas

East Herts District Council:
Councillors Peter Boylan, Mari Stevenson and Geoffrey Williamson

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 6.45pm

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Nominations were requested for the appointment of the Chair of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the 2020/2021 Municipal Year.

It was duly proposed and seconded that Councillor G Williamson be appointed as Chair for the 2020/2021 Municipal Year.

There being no other nominations it was **RESOLVED** that Councillor G Williamson be appointed as Chair of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the 2020/2021 Municipal Year.

Councillor G Williamson in the Chair.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence and no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES - JOINT REVS AND BENS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 24 JUNE 2019

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee held on 24 June 2019, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 ANNUAL UPDATE

The Committee received a report detailing the current position in the following areas:

- Performance reporting
- Other Challenges
- Outturn Budget

In relation to Housing Benefit processing (N181), the Committee was advised that the indicator had shown a significant achievement for the shared service. The level of the workload had reduced mainly due to the transfer to Universal Credit although recent figures had seen an upturn due to the current situation with regard to lockdown and job losses etc. It was also noted that the benefit system was now more complex and that some claims could take up to a maximum of 30 days to be resolved.

The Committee was informed that in terms of Housing Benefit overpayments, a review of the overpayment collection processes had been carried out that had improved working procedures. Members were also pleased to note that for the first time, both Councils were recovering more than was being raised, and accordingly the debt outstanding was reducing.

The Committee was informed of the changes in levels of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and the increasing pressure on the funds from customers on Universal Credit (UC) which put additional administrative pressure on those officers processing the awards of DHP. It was also expected that there would be a jump in the DHP caseload due to the current situation with Covid-19.

In response to a question, officers advised that the date for all customers to be on UC was still to be confirmed by the DWP although there was natural migration for some customers to the new system.

In relation to Council Tax Support, there had been a gradual reduction in caseloads up until the impact of Covid-19. Officers advised that the situation was being kept under review by the Herts Chief Financial Officer Group.

Members were advised that in terms of Council Tax, the collection rate had been lower than in previous years due to a number of reasons including delays in property banding by the Valuation Office Agency. Work was ongoing with customers to ensure help was given where needed.

The collection of Business Rates had been successful and both Councils had achieved the highest collection rates for a number of years up to the point of Covid-19. Members expressed thanks on behalf of themselves and the business community to the officers for the help and advice given to them in the current climate.

Officers advise the Committee of a number of reliefs that had been announced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic including the small business grant scheme, the retail, hospitality and leisure grant scheme, the expanded retail relief scheme and a 'discretionary' grant scheme.

The Chair and all Members of the Committee expressed their thanks to the Officers for their work over the previous year and in particular the way they were dealing with the challenges of Covid-19 for both authorities.

It was **RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

Reasons for Decision: as contained in the Report.
Alternative Options Considered: as contained in the Report.

5 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

None.

6 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

7 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR