

MINUTES of a meeting of THE LEICESTERSHIRE PARTNERSHIP REVENUES AND BENEFITS JOINT COMMITTEE held in the Board Room, Council Offices, Coalville on THURSDAY, 6 JULY 2017

Present: Councillor R D Bayliss (North West Leicestershire) (Chairman)

Councillors R Allen (Hinckley and Bosworth), J Hallam (Harborough), M Hall (Hinckley and Bosworth), P King (Harborough) and T J Pendleton (North West Leicestershire)

Officers: Mrs C Hammond, Mr A Hunkin (NWLDC), Mrs J Kenny (HBBC), Mrs S O'Hanlon (Leicestershire Partnership - Revenues & Benefits), Mr S Riley (HDC) and Mr A Wilson (HBBC)

In attendance:

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

It was moved by Councillor R D Bayliss, seconded by Councillor T J Pendleton and

RESOLVED THAT:

Councillor M Hall be elected Chairman for the ensuing year.

Councillor M Hall took the chair and thanked Councillor R D Bayliss for doing an excellent job in the past year.

2. ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

It was moved by Councillor J Hallam, seconded by Councillor R D Bayliss and

RESOLVED THAT:

Councillor P King be elected Deputy Chairman for the ensuing year.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mr B Cullen, Ms B Jolly and Mrs B Smith

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no interests declared.

5. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2017.

It was moved by Councillor T J Pendleton, seconded by Councillor R D Bayliss and

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2017 be approved and signed as a correct record.

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6. FERIS ACTIVITY

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised Members that the report before them was an update on activity so far, as requested previously by the Joint Committee. However the Government had changed the FERIS to Right Benefit Initiative, which was being considered further down the agenda. She informed Members the total reduction to date in Housing Benefit spend as a result of interventions was £298,201 and that no further funding would be received and that the funding the partnership still had remaining would be retained to use for interventions

It was moved by Councillor R D Bayliss, seconded by Councillor T J Pendleton and

RESOLVED THAT

The update on the position of FERIS be noted.

7. RISK BASED VERIFICATION SOFTWARE UPDATE

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised them that since the software had been implemented more high risk claims had been identified than had been predicted, though it did not present a true picture, as at the point of authoring the report twelve months data was not available. Risk Based Verification(RBV) went live in October 2016.

Councillor T J Pendleton asked if it would be possible to look at benchmarking once the system had been in place for a year against the national trends.

In response to questions from Councillors R Allen and M Hall, Mrs S O'Hanlon stated that not as much evidence was requested for the lower risk claims. With high risk claims requiring more than had been required prior to RBV. She explained that of 40 High Risk Claims cases sampled of which 10 required a further review.

Councillor P King sought clarification on whether it was expected that the partnership would run above the national trends and was the sample pulled a percentage of all the claims received.

Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that the sample pulled were all high risk claims and that a further report would be considered by the Management Board and then to Joint Committee in November once the software had been in place for a year.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

1. The content of the report be noted.
2. Further report on the to be considered at the November Meeting

8. UNIVERSAL CREDIT - UPDATE

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised Members that there had not been as many issues as expected; however those that has arisen were significant. Both HDC and HBBC had gone live with NWLDC due to go live 2018. She highlighted the process that claimants had to follow and that the DWP did not wish to share information with Local Authorities in relation to claims, but were very quick to seek advice from the partnership. She informed Members that the lack of information meant that there were

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processing difficulties in respect of some claims. Feedback had been provided to the DWP with regard to data sharing but no response had been received.

Councillor M Hall stated that levels of fraud could increase due to the lack of information sharing and that officers should keep plugging away to get the information required.

Councillor P King expressed concerns over the lack of information sharing as the DWP 'test and learn' approach was unfair on claimants, as it appears the DWP are not putting the testing into business as usual. Concerns were raised that a delay on the payment could have a knock on effect on housing rent or council tax payments. He also felt that issues would arise with the Employment Support Allowance as it could only be claimed following an assessment, but claimants could not get assessments. He understood that it was not just the Partnership that had these issues, but it was a national concern and therefore the Local Government Association and MPs should be asked to put pressure on the DWP to share information.

Members expressed a number of concerns in relation to the Information sharing and in response to comments and questions from the Committee, officers provided the following information:-

Mrs S O'Hanlon advised that officers were provided with 58 power point slides as part of the "handover event" with the DWP, that were not user friendly and at the events issues were raised but no responses to the queries had been received. She added that the partnership had sent five pages of questions and it appeared the DWP did not have the answers at the point the questions were raised.

Mrs J Kenny advised Members that following the handover the council had to be signed off as UC ready. However staff had not been trained and it seemed that the DWP were under pressure to meet deadlines and therefore had put pressure on HBBC to go live.

Mr S Riley advised Members that HDC raised questions at the date of going live and it was felt that it was expected by DWP that one size fitted all.

Mrs J Kenny advised Members that the issues over information sharing was not just Revenues and Benefits and that officers understood the levels of risk. She agreed that lobbying should be part of the wider response to the issues.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The content of the report be noted.

9. RIGHT BENEFIT INITIATIVE

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She informed Members that the initiative would be replacing the FERIS and the authorities would be given funding for staffing only. Members were advised that cases would be received and staff would investigate the mis-matches, therefore the partnership was looking to recruit staff to deal with the work load.

In response to a question from Councillor R D Bayliss, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that they would be no financial penalties if the partnership did not process all of the referrals.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

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RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The content of the report be noted and that the Partnership opts into the national initiative.
- 2) The option to use the unspent FERIS funding to recruit 1 temporary assessment staff to be responsible for the work generated by the interventions team and support completion of the optional RTI's be approved.

10. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE YEAR 2016/17

Mr A Wilson presented the report to Members. He highlighted to Members that there was a year-end saving of £169,586, however the remaining FERIS funding was ring-fenced and could not be redistributed back to the partners. He advised Members that it was proposed that £50,000 be retained as a general reserve, the £16,000 from the earmarked reserve be moved back to the general reserve and the remaining £105,250 be used to reduce the next year partner contributions as detailed in the table at 4.2 of the report.

In response to a question from Councillor J Hallam, Mr A Wilson advised Members that it would be prudent to keep a reserve to ensure that there are funds to cover any unforeseen costs and that it could be reviewed annually to see if the amount needed to be increased or returned to the partners.

Members agreed that they were happy for £50,000 to be kept in reserve and the remaining money be used to reduce Partnership contributions.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The financial performance and in year savings of the Partnership be noted.
- 2) Moving earmarked reserves of £16,000 back into the general reserve as not required for the purchase of the new Server be noted.
- 3) The carry forward of £84,000 of savings and reserves into 2017/18 to meet the costs of the purchase of the server, hardware, software and business development and recruitment be approved.
- 4) A general reserve of £50,000 be retained for contingencies of the partnership be approved.
- 5) £105,250 of reserves are used to reduce the contributions for the 2017/18 financial year be approved.

11. PERFORMANCE SUMMARY REPORT MARCH 2017

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised Members that it had been a busy year but in year collection targets had been met. There had been significant improvement in former years business rate collection all three authorities had met the targets for processing new claims and change events and in relation to LA error and subsidy all three were below the lower threshold. She informed Members that self-service and Arrangement Manager had been implemented and training was being cascaded, and the sickness averages were below the outturn for the previous year. She stated that it had been a good year with lots of good news stories and hoped that the next year would be just as ambitious.

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Councillor M Hall stated that he was really pleased with the report especially the sickness.

Councillor J Hallam congratulated the partnership but highlighted that the arrears reduction for the other two authorities was better than for HDC.

Mrs S O'Hanlon stated that Harborough had been in a better starting position than the others but the same effort had been put into all three by officers.

Councillor King raised concerns that the collection figures for Business Rates may not be maintained.

Mrs S O'Hanlon reminded members that they were now receiving headline information as a committee, and the more detailed matters were dealt with by the Management Board.

Councillor J Hallam questioned how debts could be written off for people who then returned to open new business a short time after.

Mr S Riley stated that debt could change and some claim more. He stated that performance and collection were in a good position.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Performance Summary Report March 2017 be noted.

12. DISCUSSION ON THE LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CABINET REPORT "DISTRICT COUNCIL COLLECTION OF COUNCIL TAX"

Mr A Wilson introduced the item to Members. He advised Members that the report had been discussed at the Leicestershire Treasurers' Association and felt that County did not understand the process. He stated that the forecasting was being dealt with incorrectly.

There had been surprise at the lack of engagement from the County. For example the final report had been circulated to districts extremely late. He expressed an underlying concern that County felt the need to review the practices, but had not requested information or engagement from the Partnership, controlled by the Management Board and Joint Committee.

Councillor M Hall advised the Committee that the Leader of the County Council had contacted all district and borough leaders and that he had two concerns over the proposals. Firstly the partnership and partner authorities were constantly reviewing collections at all levels and is happy to share especially the figure used for in year collection, and secondly that it appeared that the County was doing its own forecasting on housing growth, which was difficult as each authority could never predict when development was coming forward. He informed Members that he had responded to the County with these points.

Councillor T J Pendleton stated that the County had taken the in-year figure and not considered recovered arrears.

Councillor P King stated that he had met with his Head of Finance and that he was not adverse to any review on collection if it was to be paid for by someone else, but was mindful that if the County wanted to work with the districts then the partnership need to be clear on the terms of any review.

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Councillor M Hall stated that it would be an item on the agenda for the District Leaders' meeting. He stated that he was happy for the Partnership to provide information on how it collects and what has been collected rather than using in-year figures.

Mr S Riley advised the Members that all districts and boroughs had looked at the exemptions and passed them to County.

Mrs S O'Hanlon advised that all 3 partner authorities had improved on the previous year's rates and that only 25 Councils had achieved 98.85%. She expressed concern over the impact any review would have on the day to day work.

Mr S Riley highlighted that the papers for the County report did not explore anything other than new houses and that County received forecasts from authorities on a regular basis.

Councillor T J Pendleton made it clear that he was considering the report as a District Councillor and not in his role as a County Councillor.

Councillor P King stated that a joint response should be drafted from the partnership, agreed by Members and sent to County, making clear that there is a management board that reviews all process of the partnership and monthly forecasting is provided.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

A joint response from the Partnership, as agreed by Members, be sent to Leicestershire County Council.

13. SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS 2017/18

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The final schedule of meetings along with the times and venues be approved.

14. FORWARD PLAN

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the forward plan to Members and advised that it would be updated to include the new dates and the update reports discussed during the meeting.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Forward Plan be noted.

15. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was moved by Councillor R Allen, seconded by Councillor R D Bayliss and

RESOLVED THAT:

In pursuance of Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting on the grounds that the business to be transacted involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act and that the public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

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16. COUNCIL TAX RECRUITMENT

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She outlined to the Committee the background of the report and the proposals for recruitment.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The recommendations as set out in the report be approved.

Councillor P King entered the meeting at 4.40pm.

The meeting commenced at 4.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 5.55 pm

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