

MINUTES of a meeting of THE LEICESTERSHIRE PARTNERSHIP REVENUES AND BENEFITS JOINT COMMITTEE held in the The Partridge Suite, Atkins Building, Lower Bond Street, Hinckley on THURSDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2017

Present: Councillor M Hall (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Chairman)

Councillors R Allen (Hinckley and Bosworth), R D Bayliss (North West Leicestershire) and J Hallam (Harborough)

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

In attendance:

17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P King and T J Pendleton and Mr B Cullen, Mrs B Smith.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no interests declared.

19. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2017.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2017 be approved and signed as a correct record.

20. HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS UPDATE

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She reminded Members that the internal audit report had highlighted concerns in relation to the overpayment of housing benefit and it had been agreed that an update report would be brought to a later meeting. Members were advised that the Management Board had looked at the process and best practice had been received from the DWP. She drew Members' attention to the concern that had been raised in relation to the lack of recovery over a period of time and the report detailed the work that had been done by all three authorities. She advised Members that Housing Benefit was the hardest to recover due to the reason as to why the overpayment was made in the first place. It was highlighted to Members that following the restructure the inefficiencies in dealing with overpayments was picked up and following a request from Councillor P King the recovery processes were attached as appendices to the report.

Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that the service was proactive and doing everything it could to recover the payments with intervention, letters and phone calls. Members' attention was brought to the best practice notes at appendix c where there are only five best practice items that were not being done including social media for which very detailed guidance would be required, capturing information which was already being done in a different way and County Court action, where it was intended to develop a process following the recruitment of an additional Senior Council Tax Officer.

Chairman's initials

In response to a question from Councillor J Hallam, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that officers could look at social media but had to be mindful of legislation and could be classed as surveillance and harassment.

Ms B Jolly advised Members that staff had to bear in mind the Council's RIPA policies.

Mrs J Kenny advised Members that the partnership did what it could when using social media as a tool but it was important not to use it as "covert surveillance".

In response to questions from Members, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised that the Enforcement agency carried out other enforcement work for the Partnership and could provide wider intelligence.

Officers advised Members that fake facebook accounts could not be set up to become friends with debtors to seek information.

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised that the Partnership was seeing a difference in recovering debt and once more customers moved to Universal Credit it would not be a Revenues and Benefits debt.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Housing Benefit Overpayments Update Report be noted.

21. PERFORMANCE SUMMARY REPORT JULY 2017

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She informed Members that the details in the report were for July but the figures for August had been extracted. She advised Members that there were concerns over the new claims process times but the updated information showed that the times for both HBBC and HDC had reduced in August and NWLDC remained on target. In relation to processing changes there had again been a reduction for all three authorities and it was forecast that all three would be on target at the end of quarter 3.

Mrs S O'Hanlon was pleased to report that Housing Benefit overpayment subsidy was on target for all three authorities which had been an issue in the past and updated Members that in relation to Council Tax and Business Rates, NWLDC was slightly below target on Business rates due to one case but the other 2 authorities were exceeding target. She provided Members with updates on three current schemes – The Pub Scheme, Discretionary Rate Relief Scheme and Supporting Small Businesses Scheme.

Councillor M Hall sought clarification on the number of pubs in the Hinckley area as only 33 had responded to the letters that had been sent out in relation to the Pub Scheme. Mr A Wilson advised that there were only 59 eligible in the area that had been written to. Mrs S O'Hanlon stated there was a criteria that needed to be met in order to be eligible for the rate relief.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Performance Summary Report July 2017 be noted.

22. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE TO JULY 2017

Chairman's initials

Mr A Wilson presented the report to Members. He highlighted that there was an underspend of £38,000 in relation to FERIS due to posts being filled on a part-time basis and that the partner contributions had been adjusted by £11,000 due to the contributions and expenditure incurred. He informed Members that the Partnership was forecasting to breakeven by the end of year, but the position would be reviewed as the year progressed.

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall, Mr A Wilson advised Members that the significant difference between the budget and actual figures for July 2017 was due to expenditure being budgeted for but the money not actually being paid out.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Financial Performance to July 2017 Report be noted.

23. FORWARD PLAN

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the forward plan to Members.

Mrs J Kenny advised Members that a report would need to be brought to Committee in relation to review of the committee's Constitution.

Councillor M Hall requested that an update on Universal Credit be brought to a future meeting.

Mr A Wilson advised that the Internal Audit Plan would be brought to the November meeting.

A discussion took place around Business Rate Retention and it was agreed that a report may go to a future meeting updating Members on the position.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Forward Plan be noted and updated and amended as detailed above.

24. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the date and venue of the future meetings.

The meeting commenced at 4.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 5.02 pm