

MINUTES of a meeting of THE LEICESTERSHIRE PARTNERSHIP REVENUES AND BENEFITS JOINT COMMITTEE held in the Board Room, Council Offices, Whitwick Road, Coalville on THURSDAY, 25 JANUARY 2018

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

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

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

In attendance:

35. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor T J Pendleton.

36. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no interests declared.

37. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2017.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on the 30 November 2017 be approved and signed as a correct record.

38. PERFORMANCE SUMMARY REPORT TO DECEMBER 2017

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised Members that in relation to processing new claims for Benefits all three authorities were in a good position and in relation to changes all three authorities below target, but was confident that target would be reached by the end of the year. She informed Members that the partnership was seeing many changes being logged through the DWP, adding considerably to the workload. With regard to Universal Credit she stated that with effect from the 1st January live service had ceased which meant that anyone receiving Universal Credit from the live service would continue, but any new claimants would have to also claim Housing Benefit until such time they were live with full service.. In relation to Council Tax collection all three authorities were slightly behind projected collection figures but work had commenced in earnest on recovery and it was anticipated that all three authorities would be back on track. She highlighted all three authorities were either on or above target on business rates. She stated that the staff were busy working on collating the information to complete the NNDR1 which was due by 31st January and the Section 151 Officers from all three Council's had meet with the people who provide the appeals data and plenty of information had been sought.

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall in relation to Council Tax collection, Mr A Wilson advised Members that Council Tax had been raised at a meeting the previous week and it was mentioned that LCC still felt that collection rates were an issue and that the districts needed to demonstrate that the collection was the best it could be. He stated the LCC were happier with the forecasting.

Chairman's initials

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall in relation to how soon were new properties billed, Mrs S O'Hanlon stated that the partnership was very quick and work well will each authority to ensure they receive planning permission when granted and to ensure all information relating to all properties was up to date, the partnership worked closely with other services within the authorities.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Performance Summary Report to December 2017 be noted.

39. UNIVERSAL CREDIT - UPDATE

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised Members that not a lot had changed. As already advised NWL would be going live on 7th February and that the big thing to remember was that the DWP are going live not the local authority. Within the payments would be a housing cost element. She stated that when claimants present to customer services if it is a Universal Claim they should be referred to the DWP and they should not get the same level of response. She informed Members that until a resident's postcode went live they would still be eligible for Housing Benefit. Members were advised that even though two authorities were live, all postcodes within those authorities are not live, and that in turn added issues with payments and staff. She highlighted that there was now a free phone number and that it appeared that there was not as many residents presenting with queries as expected and it could be that they were self-helping or falling out of the system. She advised Members that close control was being kept on the work that was being done and regular meetings were still being held and that there were changes on the horizon as detailed in the report.

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall in relation to issues of rent arrears from delays in receiving payments, officers provided the following responses:-

Mrs J Kenny advised that HBBC had seen an increase in rent arrears but it had been hard to analyse the impact on rental income.

Mr C Lambert advised that even though NWL were not yet live with Universal Credit feedback from East Midlands Housing was that there was a 14% increase in arrears and using the projections so that NWL could ensure it was doing all it could to prepare in advance.

Ms B Jolly advised that feedback from their registered housing providers for HDC was the same as NWL, as HDC did not have housing stock.

In response to a question from Councillor R Allen about support for residents who were unable to claim on line, Mrs J Kenny stated that the Citizens Advice Bureau would be able to support and at HBBC, Customer Services were able to provide support on the self-help machines at the hub.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The content of the report be noted.

40. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE TO DECEMBER 2017

Mr A Wilson presented the report to Members. He advised that the budget was currently showing an underspend of £70k, and that the key variances were the FERIS underspend of £56k due to the posts being filled part-time rather than full-time and that salaries were underspent by £39k due to some posts being vacant for much of the year.

In relation to a question from Councillor J Hallam over the impact on workloads that filling posts for FERIS, Mrs S O'Hanlon reminded Members that the FERIS was superseded by another initiative

Councillor J Hallam queried how overpayments had been made.

Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that there were a number of reasons for overpayment including fraud, incorrect information provided or forgetting to advise of changes. She stated that reviews would be carried out on those that were in receipt of pension or statement of earnings.

In response to a question from Councillor R Hadkiss, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised that the underspend of the salaries was due to a number of changes within the roles required and movement around the service areas to accommodate the work. She also highlighted that there was an underspend within Benefits and that it had been decided to keep it in the budget until Universal Credit had bedded in and the impact fully understood.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Financial Performance of the Partnership be noted.

41. 2018/2019 PROPOSED BUDGET

Mr A Wilson presented the report to Members. He advised that provision had been made for a 2% pay award and that in relation to general inflation no provision had been made for other than contractual increases at 3.9%. He informed Members that the contributions for the 2018/19 year would fall on the general fund expenditure of the partners however once the accounts had been finalised at the end of the year should there be any savings Members may wish to review the final position. He highlighted the cost pressures that contributed to the increase in contributions.

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall, Mr A Wilson advised there was currently some salary savings and if in the same position the following year it would be reported as such. Though, also mentioned given the increase in the Council Tax base work is ongoing with regard to the pressures and requirements in the Council Tax team linked to Cllr Halls previous comment about how quickly new properties are billed for Council Tax.

Mrs J Kenny advised Members that staffing had been managed naturally when staff had decided to move on posts had not been filled rather than making redundancies.

Mr A Wilson advised that the budget included 2% vacancy factor therefore some savings had been built in.

Councillor J Hallam queried the increase in the budget for electricity and decrease for gas, and the increase of the virtual mail room.

Mr A Wilson stated that the budget was a reflection on the bills that had been received for the previous year but he would double check. In relation to the mail room it was due to inflation and postal increases.

Chairman's initials

It was moved by Councillor R Allen, seconded by Councillor R Hadkiss and

RESOLVED THAT:

The 2018/19 Budget Proposals for the Partnership be approved.

42. SERVICE PLAN 2018/2019

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the Service Plan to Members. She advised Members that the plan detailed the key projects and performance indicators for the forthcoming year. She highlighted that the key projects for the year were an upgrade to the software which would provide one login per member of staff for all systems that access was required for, Re-tender for the mailing services and making all services available for customers to self-service which could lead to efficiencies and less room for inputting errors. She reminded that all three authorities offered on-line billing. In relation to the performance indicators, Members were advised that there was not too much and recommended the PI's contained were approved.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Service Plan 2018/2019 be noted.

43. FORWARD PLAN

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

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The Forward Plan be noted.

44. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the date and venue of future meetings.

The meeting commenced at 4.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 5.15 pm