

MINUTES of a meeting of THE LEICESTERSHIRE PARTNERSHIP REVENUES AND BENEFITS JOINT COMMITTEE held in the Board Room, Council Offices, Coalville on THURSDAY, 17 NOVEMBER 2016

Present: Councillor M Surtees (Hinckley and Bosworth) (in the Chair) in absence of Councillor R D Bayliss

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

Chief Executives: Mr S Atkinson (HBBC)

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)

22. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor R D Bayliss and Ms C E Fisher.

23. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no interests declared.

24. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2016.

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2016 be approved and signed as a correct record.

25. UNIVERSAL CREDIT ROLLOUT AND IMPLICATIONS

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She highlighted to Members that information was constantly changing and therefore the report was not up to date. She confirmed that the Partnership had been advised that North West Leicestershire would 'go live' in 2018. She reminded Members that Universal Credit would replace 6 benefits including Housing Benefit and informed Members that any claimant that was in receipt of one of the six benefits would be asked to migrate to the full service by July 2019. However, how this would work would not be decided yet and, should anyone be consulted by the DWP, the Partnership would like to be able to add to the response. She explained that full service would require claimants to manage their benefits digitally. However, there was a note of caution that the platform is digital by default. She highlighted a key point that it was not the local authority that would go live but the Job Centre, adding that, due to the geographical area, one postcode in Harborough had gone live and it was expected that three postcodes in the Long Eaton area would go live in May 2017.

Mrs S O'Hanlon stated that many issues were being flagged up and as such the Partnership would have a key contact and detailed notes would be kept of the problems raised, as it was becoming apparent that sites that were live with full service were experiencing issues. She informed Members that the main issue that claimants could experience, which in turn would have a knock on effect for Councils, was the delay in payments due to the time that was taken to process the applications, resulting in tenants not being able to pay their rent on time. Members were advised that claimants could apply

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for advanced payments, which would then be recovered from the awards over a six month period.

Following questions from Mr S Atkinson and Councillor M Surtees, Mrs S O'Hanlon confirmed that the rollout could lead to rent arrears issues and that the interim payment would have to be paid back.

Members were advised that all claimants of Universal Credit would need access to an email account and that officers were looking at working closely with other partners to help customers improve IT skills. The issues over rent arrears were to be flagged to housing teams, as they are expected to verify rental income.

Councillor M Hall stated that the authorities had to run with the programme and could only do what they could. He highlighted that it was good that not all the partnership authorities were migrating at the same time and that, with the correct training and signposting, staff should be able to assist customers. He asked if officers were able to identify those that maybe affected by the process and notify them.

Councillor T J Pendleton sought clarification on the number of claimants that would be affected in the DE postcodes, so that the local Ward Members could be informed of the changes to ensure correct signposting.

Ms B Jolly advised that Harborough were in the process of pulling together all the postcodes with support from the surrounding authorities to ensure that residents could be sent to the right Job Centres.

Councillor P King expressed concerns over the issues that could arise from the migration and he felt that all Members and officers concerned needed briefing, along with good communications to all residents. He also highlighted that there would be a backlash from residents, who were unable to access the internet and those who would encounter financial issues, as they had to wait for payments. He asked if the DWP were ready for the process and that political groups should make representations to their MPs, as there could be many people without money before Christmas.

Mr S Atkinson advised Members that, if they had concerns or issues, then they could be registered informally first with the partnership, who would feedback to the Management Board and then escalate if needed.

Councillor M Hall questioned whether a change of circumstance error, taken by the wrong organisation would help or hinder subsidy payments a resident's claim. In response Mrs S O'Hanlon stated that it would depend on the classification if any error was made, and if it was DWP or LA error.

RESOLVED THAT:

The content of the report be noted.

26. PERFORMANCE REPORT SEPTEMBER 2016

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the report to Members. She advised Members that Council Tax collection rates had been exceeded by all three authorities and that the review of the Single Person Discount had been completed, and all review forms and reminders had been sent out. In respect of NNDR both HBBC and NWLDC remain on track, however due to a couple of businesses relocating, HDC had slipped. She informed Members that the new valuation list would come into force as of 1 April 2017. As a result the Partnership was writing to all the ratepayers to advise them to check their rateable value and to

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promote self-service, as well as urging each authority property team to check council properties.

In relation to Benefits, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that the processing of new claims was out of target and it was a better position than at the same stage the previous year. As such the direction of travel was correct. She reminded Members that, at the previous meeting, discussions had taken place about the subsidy position with HDC and, as at the end of October, HDC was in a much better position. She highlighted to Members: that the consultation had been completed on the LCTS scheme and that an update would be brought to the next meeting as part of the service plan; that there had been a positive response to the direct debit service over the web; the work that had been carried out on the empty properties through the new homes bonus; and that there was no long term staff sickness to report.

In response to a question from Councillor M Hall, Mrs S O'Hanlon advised Members that the figures in bold in relation to the NNDR arrears were a better position than previous years.

In response to a question from Councillor J Hallam, Mrs S O'Hanlon confirmed that reminders should be sent within the month.

In response to a question from Councillor P King, Mrs S O'Hanlon and Ms B Jolly explained the position in relation to the outstanding business rates for HDC.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Performance Report September 2016 be noted.

27. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE TO SEPTEMBER 2016

Mr A Wilson presented the report to Members. He advised Members that the budget was forecasting a small underspend and that there was a salary saving as a result of the current vacancies.

Mrs J Kenny advised Members that, in terms of recruitment, Management Board were considering reintroducing scrutiny of vacancies to see if there was capacity within the existing team to take on the work, especially with the introduction of Universal Credit.

RESOLVED THAT:

The financial performance of the Partnership be noted.

28. FORWARD PLAN

Mrs S O'Hanlon presented the forward plan to Members and highlighted that the Service Plan and Budget proposals for the next year would be brought to the next meeting.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Forward Plan be noted.

29. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the date and venue of the future meetings.

Councillor M Surtees announced to the Members that it would be Mr S Atkinson's last meeting as he was retiring at the end of the year. Members took the opportunity to acknowledge and thank Mr S Atkinson for his hard work and contributions to the Committee from day one.

Councillor P King entered the meeting at 4.40pm.

Mr A Wilson entered the meeting at 4.45pm.

The meeting commenced at 4.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 5.30 pm