

MINUTES of a MEETING of THE LEICESTERSHIRE PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE held in the Atkins Building, Hinckley on WEDNESDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2013.

Present: Councillors R D Bayliss (Chairman) (In the Chair)

Councillors P Dann (HDC) and K Lynch (HBBC)

Chief Executives: Mr S Atkinson (HBBC) and Ms C E Fisher (NWLDC)

Officers: Mr R Bowmer (Head of Finance, NWLDC), Mr L Butler (Senior Partnership Manager), Mrs V Eaton (Electoral Services Assistant), Ms L Horton (Monitoring Officer), Ms B Jolly (HDC), Ms J Kenny (HBBC) and Mrs K Plummer (Section 151 Officer).

25. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Dr P Bremner (HDC), Mrs A Graves (HDC) and Mr S Kohli (HBBC)

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no interests declared.

27. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2013.

Councillor P Dann referred to the recent changes to the constitution and announced that Councillor P Bremner had been appointed as the second member to represent Harborough District Council at future meetings. Unfortunately he was unable to attend tonight's meeting.

The second member for Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council would be decided on 3 December by their Council.

North West Leicestershire District Council's second member would be appointed at Cabinet on 19 December and the two substitutes would be nominated.

Councillor P Dann explained that if for any reason Members from Harborough were unable to attend a future meeting then substitutes would be named a week before the Committee meeting takes place.

Councillor K Lynch stated that similar arrangements would be in place for Hinckley and Bosworth.

Ms C E Fisher asked for clarity on when the new members would start attending Joint Joint Committee meetings. Mr L Butler explained that once appointed they would be able to attend.

It was moved by Councillor R D Bayliss, seconded by Councillor K Lynch and

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2013 be approved as a correct record.

Chairman's initials

28. **REVIEW AND ALIGN EXISTING POLICIES AND GUIDELINES FOR THE PARTNERSHIP**

Mr L Butler presented the report to members and stated the purpose was to align all the Partnership's Policies and Guidelines as each Council had its own individual policies/guidelines covering the revenues and benefits service area. This alignment would support the Partnership and customer services teams to harmonise existing working practices/procedures. This would also enable "one" approach for the provision of staff training.

Mr L Butler confirmed that as part of this review consideration had been given to the latest Government regulations to meet the changes in the administration of Council Tax, Council Tax Support, Housing Benefits, Fraud and the Non Domestic Rate.

He added that consideration had also been given to the recent changes introduced as part of the coalition Government's Welfare Reform Programme.

He gave the following summary of the appendices and asked for questions from Members where appropriate.

Councillor P Dann asked if Members could have a summary in each case of how these policies affect people now and what changes would result from the new policies.

Ms C E Fisher asked in addition what changes would be experienced in terms of outcomes for customers – positive, negative or no change.

Appendix A – Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Guidelines

The policy had been updated to reflect the Government's Welfare Reform changes. The criteria had been expanded to allow the DHPs to be awarded for additional reasons such as hardship created by the bedroom subsidy, the Housing Benefit Cap, changes to the Local Housing Allowance rates, support in rent deposit and moving costs. The old criteria were still in place whereby DHPs were paid if there was a shortfall in the rent and the claimant was suffering financial hardship.

The additional criteria would have a positive impact for customers as more people would be able to make applications.

Appendix B – Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support Verification Policy

This policy had been aligned in terms of process and procedure to ensure consistency in the process followed when verifying evidence on new claims and changes. It had also been updated to reflect legislative changes which now allow a lower level of verification to be undertaken when a claimant had less than £6,000 in their bank. This would have a positive impact on customers as they would not have to supply evidence before submitting a claim.

Mr S Atkinson asked whether the lower level of verification could lead to more cases of fraud. Mr L Butler explained that this would not be the case as the policy was aligned with DWP guidelines and these would be stringently followed.

Appendix C – Local Housing Allowance Safeguarding Policy

This was a county-wide policy which had been updated to encompass the changes in terminology and other specific legislative amendments which had been introduced by the

Government's Welfare Reform Act. Very little had changed from the existing policy. It had been brought up to date. There would be no impact to the customer.

Appendix D – NNDR Hardship Relief Policy

This was a new policy and had been drafted to align the application and approval processes for Partnership staff to follow. The hardship criteria had not changed. Each case would be taken on merit, be in the interests of Council Tax payers and be affordable by the Local Authority. Companies can make an application to the Council for hardship relief and should this be awarded there will be a financial implication for the Council as the general fund bears a proportion of the cost.

Following a question from Mr R Bowmer regarding how often were payments made, Mr L Butler explained that there had been only one enquiry made at Harborough District Council last year. It was likely that there may only be one or two applications per year.

Following a question from Councillor R D Bayliss, Mr L Butler stated that the Hardship Relief fund was well publicised. Details were on the websites and information sheets for non domestic rates had been produced and would be enclosed with Non Domestic Rate bills.

Appendix E – NNDR Discretionary Rate Relief Guidelines

Each Council has its own criteria for the award of Discretionary Rate Relief and these would remain the same. The main body of the policy had been realigned across the whole Partnership to include Government guidance on the legislative power and the state aid rules which Councils now had to take into account. The procedure for the application and approval processes had also been aligned. Appendix C of each Discretionary Rate Relief policy details the individual Council's criteria which meet their local needs and priorities. Appendix D has been added which allows any ratepayer to make an application under this scheme.

The impact would be that any business could apply for rate relief. Councils were more mindful of the costs and impact on the Council Tax Payer.

Appendix F – Council Tax and NNDR Payment Dates Policy

This was a new policy document which brings all three councils into alignment on cash payment dates for monthly, half yearly and annually.

Annual cash payments for Harborough District Council would change from 1 June to 1 April and for half yearly payers this would change from 1 June and 1 October to 1 April and 1 September.

For North West Leicestershire the half yearly payment dates were changing from 1 April and 1 October to 1 April to 1 September.

The Direct Debit dates had not changed, as they currently worked well for all councils and helped spread the workload.

The payment due dates of the first of the month worked well and would allow aligned recovery processes.

There would be no impact on payments.

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Councillor P Dann asked if there were any figures available of the number of people who paid annually and half yearly affected by the change of payment dates.

Mr L Butler stated that he would carry out a calculation and email the figures to the Committee members.

Following questions regarding notifying cash payers, Mr L Butler explained that information on the change of payment dates would be provided to the customer services systems and this information would be sent out in January separate from the demand notices, so that cash payers would know in advance to enable them to make the necessary adjustments.

Appendix G – Recovery Policy

This policy had been redrafted as each Council's policy was very specific to their previous procedure. Since the Partnership was formed, it now follows a more "hybrid" procedure, which incorporates the best of each Council's previous approach.

The Partnership required an aligned strategy on recovery to enable a consistent approach with customers, clear cut messages and for the training to be the same for all three customer service teams as well as the Partnership staff. This also allowed the Partnership to align the court dates, which would reduce the number of court visits, as one officer could present at Court for all three councils at the same time, which would be much more efficient.

On the operational side the Partnership would inform customers of the next steps included with recovery notices as an information sheet and will provide a better understanding of the process.

Appendix H – Sanctions and Prosecution Policy

The main change here would be that the Cautions and Administrative Penalties would now be signed off by each Council's legal team. All other aspects of the revised policy would be largely the same as the previous one.

Each case would be addressed on merit and investigated and sanctioned accordingly.

Following a request regarding future policy changes, Ms J Kenny agreed to draw up a list of potential policies that may change in the future and what affect they would have on communities and other implications. This to be discussed at the next meeting.

RESOLVED THAT:

The revised policies and guidelines, as detailed in appendices A to H of the report, be approved.

29. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE TO SEPTEMBER 2013

Mrs K Plummer presented the report to members and explained that the report detailed the financial performance of the Partnership from April until the end of September 2013. She gave a verbal update on the 2014/15 budget proposals.

Mrs K Plummer drew members' attention to the forecast outturn position of the Partnership which was reviewed on a monthly basis. The variances as at 30 September were detailed in paragraph 3.6. Overall the Partnership would be coming in on budget

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with the exception of office overspend of £5,000 and a postage overspend of £14,000, which was due to an increase in activity. A saving on court costs and liability expenses of £19,000 had been agreed and would offset the overspent amounts detailed above.

Mrs K Plummer gave a brief update position to members on Business Rate Pooling. She explained that the LTA would be considering Business Rate Pooling at their meeting on Friday, 29 November 2013. They need to consider whether there would be enough in the pool to make it viable to continue. The outcome would be reported to members at the next meeting.

Mrs K Plummer explained that there would be a 'cooling off' period of 12 weeks before the final settlement.

Ms C E Fisher stated that it would be very helpful if all Chief Executives were informed of the process of what would happen and when. She had not been aware of these negotiations.

Ms C E Fisher referred to paragraph 3.9 and asked if Mrs K Plummer could also provide details on how the decision could affect funding schemes.

Mrs K Plummer agreed to supply this information in a separate note to the Chief Executives.

Ms C E Fisher asked that the City Council should be given the "heads up" on this and she would inform the LEAP.

Following a question from Councillor P Dann regarding the increase in postage costs, Ms J Kenny explained that the virtual mailroom situation had been set up to mitigate these costs for the future. The Partnership was seeing an increase in the number of postage items and it was hoped that we could mitigate this expenditure.

Councillor R D Bayliss referred to the Court Liability savings and asked if these would be realised again next year? Mrs K Plummer explained that the Partnership was forecasting the same general savings for the 2014/15 Budget.

Mrs K Plummer then went on to update members on preparations for the 2014/2015 budget. The Management Board had considered the first draft of the 2014/15 budget on Monday, 18 November 2013 and this would have to be approved by the Joint Committee before the end of January 2014. The budget as yet did not identify any savings as these would be identified during the review that was going to take place in 2014. It was envisaged that, even without these savings, the contribution from each authority would not increase for 2014/15. Once any savings had been identified, they would be brought back to the Joint Committee and the contributions would be reduced accordingly.

Mrs C E Fisher referred to page 218 of the agenda the 4 exploratory projects intended to create efficiencies and asked for the following information to be submitted to the next meeting of the Joint Committee:-

1. Proposed indicative savings
2. How have these savings been captured
3. Time line when these figures would be realised

Ms J Kenny explained that the Management Board had discussed these projects earlier in the week and had asked Partnership Managers to carry out more work on how they could be taken forward. Ms J Kenny agreed to bring this information back to the Joint

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Committee.

RESOLVED THAT:

The financial performance of the Partnership be noted.

30. PERFORMANCE REPORT (SEPTEMBER 2013)

Mr L Butler presented a summary version of the Partnership's performance up to the end of September to members and highlighted the performance on the key indicators on page 188.

Mrs L Horton queried the title "Change Events end of year target: 13 days (April through to January 2014)" and asked why actual September figures had not been used. Mr L Butler explained that each month had been profiled to reach the end of year target.

Ms C E Fisher stated that the Performance report was "good news" and congratulated Mr L Butler and his team.

Councillor P Dann reiterated his comments from the last meeting.

It was suggested that a performance brief should go back to each authority.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Performance Report (September 2013) be noted.

31. COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT UPDATE REPORT (SEPTEMBER 2013)

Mr L Butler presented the report to members and gave the position of awards of Council Tax support and how the Partnership assisted people who were in financial difficulties under each Council Tax hardship arrangement.

Ms C E Fisher referred to the time delay and thought that this was very misleading. Mr L Butler stated that Council Tax Support had reduced and the number of new claims had also gone down. This was due to the reduction in both working and pension ages, people who had moved address or were not in receipt of the qualifying wage. A number of people were going back to work and changing their lifestyles, and therefore did not now meet the criteria.

Mr L Butler informed members that people were encouraged to apply via the DWP and Jobcentre Plus. He added that promotions had been undertaken to direct people to these payments.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Council Tax Support update report be noted.

32. PARTNERSHIP PROJECT WORK PLAN 2013/14

Mr L Butler presented his report which gave a summary of the Work Plan within the Partnership.

Mr L Butler explained that the report detailed improvements to the service and also national items such as Universal Credit and Welfare Reform.

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Following a question regarding Universal Credit from Ms C E Fisher, Mr L Butler explained that the Partnership was waiting for the revised document and the final version would be published in the Autumn next year.

Mr S Atkinson added that the DWP would be meeting with the Partners at a national level on 5 December to discuss this further.

Ms C E Fisher asked for a briefing note on Universal Credit with the timeline.

Ms J Kenny and Mrs B Jolly agreed to produce the briefing note.

Mr L Butler was currently working on the draft Partnership Service Plan for 2014/15 and this would be going to the Management Board and shared with this Committee at the next meeting.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Partnership Project Work Plan 2013/14 be noted

33. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Following a request to hold an additional Joint Committee meeting in January 2014 to consider and approve the 2014/15 budget, it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The next meeting will take place on Wednesday, 15 January 2014 at 4.30pm at the Atkins Building.

The meeting commenced at 4.30pm and closed at 5.36pm

Ms J Kenny and Mrs K Plummer entered the meeting at 4.35pm

Chairman's signature