

JOINT PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE held at UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7pm on 17 JANUARY 2011

Present: Councillor A J Ketteridge – Chairman.
Councillors S Carter, M Danvers and A Johnson (Harlow Members);
Councillors J Cheetham (substitute for Councillor R P Chambers)
and P Wilcock (Uttlesford Members).

Officers in attendance: Malcolm Morley (Chief Executive, Harlow Council),
John Mitchell (Chief Executive, Uttlesford District Council), Simon
Martin (Divisional Head: Customer Support and Revenue Services),
Rebecca Procter (Democratic Services Officer) and Adrian Webb
(Director of Corporate Services).

JPC1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE CHAIRMAN

Members agreed to appoint Councillor Ketteridge and Councillor Johnson as
Chairman and Vice Chairman respectively.

JPC2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R P Chambers.

JPC3 TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chairman referred Members to the report setting out draft terms of
reference. He drew attention to the issue of public speaking prior to meetings.
Whilst it was the case that Uttlesford District Council allowed up to 15 minutes
for public statements, Harlow Council did not. Suggested wording for a
provision to allow public speaking for up to ten minutes before meetings of this
Committee was set out in the report.

Councillor Johnson said whilst Harlow Council did not allow public speaking, it
did allow two questions to be put in writing with 48 hours' notice, with one
supplementary question permitted. He said the draft provision on public
speaking relating to the Joint Committee was an acceptable compromise, as
long as it was at the Chairman's discretion. He would welcome constructive
comments from the public, trade unions and staff.

The Chairman proposed that members of the public, including staff, be
permitted to address the meeting as set out in the report , and it was

RESOLVED that members of the public, including staff, be
permitted to address the meeting, in accordance with the terms of
reference set out in the report.

The Chairman then invited those who had given notice of their wish to speak to
address the meeting. The notes of those who spoke are appended to these
minutes.

The Chairman thanked those who had spoken for their constructive comments.

Councillor Johnson expressed a desire for the post of Chairman to be rotated every six months.

The Chairman proposed that the terms of reference for the Joint Committee outlined in the report with the addition that the Committee Chairman post be rotated every six months be adopted.

RESOLVED unanimously that the terms of reference for the Joint Committee be adopted and that the post of Chairman be rotated on a six monthly basis.

JPC4

RECRUITMENT OF PROJECT MANAGER

Malcolm Morley referred to the three statements addressed to the Committee. He said he fully agreed with the need to address the implications of the proposed partnership to ensure the resilience, continuity and quality of service for service users; particularly vulnerable people. He acknowledged that the complexity of the relationship between service providers and recipients needed to be addressed very carefully with the full engagement of the staff. He believed that the two Councils were setting out a practical approach to move forward to address these issues and he recommended to the Joint Committee the appointment of project management capacity and expertise.

John Mitchell agreed an appointment to this post was crucial.

RESOLVED that

- 1 The Committee agrees the specification and approach set out in the report for a project manager to oversee the development and implementation of the Revenues and Benefits Partnership.
- 2 Officers proceed with recruitment of a project manager.

JPC5

PROGRESS WITH IMPROVEMENT EAST BID AND PROCUREMENT OF IT SOFTWARE

John Mitchell updated the Joint Committee on the Improvement East bid, confirming that £200,000 had been authorised by Improvement East to support the development and implementation of the partnership.

Adrian Webb gave the Committee a brief overview of the procurement process, which would entail consideration of the revenues and benefits system used by each Council; telephony, website functionality, branding and presence; online forms package and document imaging system. He summarised the process, setting out suggested phases of procurement of the new ICT solution, and estimates for timescales. He drew attention to the fact that it might be possible to procure via the OGC Buying Solutions Framework rather than undertaking OJEU procurement. He concluded with a brief explanation of the requirements of the Government's Code of Connection, as it was possible the partnership would be required to submit its own Code of Connection.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the report.

JPC6

IDENTIFYING IMPLICATIONS OF INCORPORATING THE UNIVERSAL CREDIT REVIEW

Adrian Webb briefly summarised the possible impact of the introduction of a universal credit system. A piece of consultancy work to identify the implications both for a Council working on its own and in partnership was to be undertaken either by the Uttlesford and Harlow Councils jointly or through Improvement East.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the on-going work on identifying the implications of the universal credit review.

JPC7

FREQUENCY AND LOCATION OF MEETINGS

The Committee expressed a desire, particularly in the early stages of the development of the partnership, to schedule monthly meetings even if these needed to be cancelled. In this way diaries could be organised. The venue for meetings would alternate between the offices of both Councils.

RESOLVED that the next meeting of the Committee be in February in Harlow and that a schedule of meeting dates be circulated.

The meeting ended at 8pm.

Public Statements

Julian Sayer

I have lived in Uttlesford for the whole of my life; I have worked for Uttlesford for 25 years and have seen many changes over that period. Uttlesford District Council has always been a good employer and has managed to recruit and retain good staff locally, who in turn, have spent their salaries locally which has helped the local economy to thrive. We are in a world of constant change and the need to be economical, effective and efficient is now more apparent than ever before, and I therefore accept the reasoning behind the Revenues and Benefits Partnership, although it will probably mean that, if I do have a job come the end of it, that I may have to travel to Harlow every day instead of a pleasant 15 minute journey along a country road into Saffron Walden.

Management at Uttlesford are now aware, following one to one interviews with Revenues and Benefits staff of the difficulties that many staff will face in travelling to Harlow, indeed, some categories of staff may not find it feasible to travel to Harlow at all.

Whilst leaving a significant presence in the Saffron Walden offices may not seem particularly efficient, neither should it be discounted altogether. Uttlesford residents should still be able to access specialist skills face to face if they come to the office.

The increased use of home working, where appropriate, should be encouraged. A home working option appears to have the support of many staff who cannot, or will find it difficult to travel to Harlow.

For those Uttlesford staff that will be required to travel to Harlow, a realistic disturbance allowance (to compensate for additional travelling time) and a realistic mileage reimbursement rate needs to be agreed with the Staff Union at the earliest opportunity to reduce the financial uncertainty of those staff affected.

Finally, my apologies to those Members from Harlow District Council that are present, this statement has been mainly about Uttlesford and its staff, but it is important to you too, as in the not too distant future we are likely to become Harlow staff under a TUPE agreement and Harlow can be assured that the loyalty and hard work that has been given to Uttlesford in the past will be given to you in the future.

Some Uttlesford staff have already met their Harlow opposite numbers and we will strive to work together in achieving the aims and the ambitions, and indeed, the savings required of the Partnership, in return, we ask that all staff in the Partnership are treated fairly and with the respect that they could expect of any good employer, albeit during a difficult economic period.

Thank you for your time.

Sue Mustill

Although I do not live in the Uttlesford District I have worked here at the Council for 12 years. I know many of the residents and have spent time with people in the community.

I am responsible for the Benefits team who make decisions and assessments of Housing and Council tax benefit for residents of Uttlesford. The Benefits team here have concerns regarding the Harlow partnership with staff being based in Harlow and the resources that will be left here in Uttlesford to assist with Benefit advice.

We understand that Harlow will be the main service provider for the partnership, but I think we must understand legally how Harlow will take over the running of our Uttlesford Revenues and Benefit Service; how can we be assured that the service to our customers will not deteriorate; and that any presence in Uttlesford will be maintained throughout.

Uttlesford is a very large rural area where some residents are as far as 23 miles from the Council Offices. I understand that nowhere in Harlow is more than 2 miles from the Council Offices in the Town Centre.

A presence for Benefit enquiries and help with form completion and information gathering is essential for good efficient customer care and the smooth running of the service in general.

I know of many people who have fallen on hard times through no fault of their own in the last few years because of the economic downturn. Some are elderly, disabled or vulnerable.

I would hope that these people will still be able to come in to the offices either in Saffron Walden or Great Dunmow to see someone face to face to ask for help, receive the relevant information and be able to go away thinking that they had been treated well and Uttlesford Council had taken time to treat them as an individual.

Staff at Uttlesford have worked hard to get to know their public and to treat them fairly. They have an excellent relationship with the people of the community and it would be a pity if this relationship is jeopardised by taking more than a small percentage of the service out of the district.

Whilst we remain positive regarding the partnership and the challenges ahead we hope that the service that we provide to the public will remain accessible to the people of Uttlesford.

Sue Ellis

I am a resident of Uttlesford and the Principal Council Tax Officer having worked for Uttlesford District Council in Revenues Services for the last 22 years.

I would like to thank the Chairman and the Committee for allowing me to make a statement on behalf of myself and the Council Tax team at this time.

We are proud of the level of service which is currently provided by the Council Tax Team to our customers and the excellent performance levels that are currently being achieved, and I am certain that the other UDC teams and the Harlow Revenue Service feel the same.

Combining the Revenue Services of two Authorities is challenging and it will require all sides pulling together to achieve a successful outcome whilst mitigating the interim effects on both service quality and collection rates. A sustained drop in the collection rate will result in most of the potential savings draining away, and a drop in service level will inevitably result in higher complaints and backlogs in correspondence which will be costly to resolve.

Maintaining customer confidence and the stability of the service will be crucial.

Communication is an important issue in any change and hopefully this can be coordinated so that information is shared with staff at both authorities at the same time including any feedback to questions asked.

As the project moves forward and more details become available to the general public, staff will also be fielding customer queries so it is important we are in possession of as much information as possible.

I personally would also welcome some initial team building in the near future; it would be good to meet our Harlow counterparts on a regular basis in order that working relationships can start ~~Page 5~~ built.

My team are keen to be closely involved in this project and making it a success. Including staff that have a vast amount of experience and professional knowledge will ensure that all the processes of the service are considered and taken into account, rather than having an unexpected gap in service provision which may prove costly.

Whilst savings are key to this project and the primary driver, this needs to be balanced with the quality of the newly created service. It is important that vulnerable groups are accounted for and not disadvantaged by the new Partnership and that we retain the 'local touch' which all our customers expect and enjoy currently. Access to the service and specialist advice is key to all our customers, especially during the current economic climate that the country is facing, and I fully support Julian's statement that a significant presence within the UDC area should not be discounted.

I am sure however there is the commitment on both sides to make this work, and opportunities to have a fresh look at service delivery which will be innovative and exciting.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to this statement.