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## REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP

### 1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report brings Members up-to-date with progress on the Revenues and Benefits Partnership Working initiative which is one of our key priorities to 2010 contained within section 7 of “Our Plans for the Future”.
- 1.2 Members will recall earlier reports to this Committee in March and October 2005.

### 2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) report recognised that the Council had a number of capacity issues across a range of services. One of those identified was the Revenue and Benefit Service which provides Business Rate collection to around 1,800 commercial and industrial premises; Council Tax collection to 32,000 payers and Benefit Administration to 6,000 claimants.
- 2.2 This report draws to Members attention the work currently being undertaken to address these areas for improvement

### 3 BUSINESS RATE COLLECTION

- 3.1 In March 2005 the Council entered into an interim arrangement with Chelmsford Borough Council (CBC) to levy and collect the Business Rate for its 1,800 commercial customers. This saw CBC undertaking this function for a three-month trial period which expired in June 2005. The trial was so successful that the Council entered into a two-year rolling contractual agreement with CBC to continue the service.
- 3.2 The Head of Service is currently in negotiations with CBC to see whether there is scope to extend the service to encompass inspection, recovery and enforcement, and will report verbally at the meeting on progress made in this direction.

### 4 REVENUES AND BENEFITS

- 4.1 The Head of Service is working with service professionals from Chelmsford and Maldon Councils to develop collaborative working in the fields of Council Tax collection and Benefit administration. Colchester Borough Council was previously reported as being potential partners in the initiative but formally withdrew from the consortium in January 2006.
- 4.2 Work has now advanced beyond the initial stages and the remaining three authorities are financing the appointment of a Resource Officer who can undertake essential research work to progress the project. Rochford has funded its share of the cost from a one-off £35,000 payment from the ODPM/LGA Capacity Building Fund.

- 4.3 Meetings of interested parties were held in October, December and earlier this month.
- 4.4 Free consultancy support is being provided by the Anglian Revenue Partnership (a collaboration between Breckland, Forest Heath and East Cambridgeshire District Councils) who started this process over three years ago and who have now established an independent body for service delivery. The Chelmsford, Maldon and Rochford Partnership could possibly develop in this way over the next two years.

## **5 PROJECT SCOPING**

- 5.1 The Resource Officer has scoped the project and the various appendices to this report demonstrate progress made.
- Appendix 1 – Communications Protocol
  - Appendix 2 – Partnership Scoping Document
  - Appendix 3 – Functional Structure Diagrams
  - Appendix 4 – Project Plan
- 5.2 The next stage would be to attempt to evaluate savings which might be achieved over the envisaged time-line and it is proposed to report this before the summer recess. At this point it is likely that the Partnership will be looking for a firm commitment from its constituent authorities to proceed.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1 It is recognised that local authorities can no longer work in isolation because of the external pressures for efficiency and savings. Collaborative working of this nature provides a path to both without exposure to outsourcing the function or the inherent risks.

## **7 RECOMMENDATION**

- 7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES** to:
- (1) Note the progress made on collaborative working.
  - (2) Endorse the proposal for further work with the reduced number of local authority participants.
  - (3) Approve the Communications Protocol and Project Plan.

Steve Clarkson

Head of Revenue & Housing Management

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**Background Papers:-**

None

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## APPENDIX 1

**JOINT WORKING INITIATIVE**

Chelmsford Borough Council  
Colchester Borough Council  
Maldon District Council  
Rochford District Council

**COMMUNICATIONS and CONSULTATION PROTOCOL**

This protocol sets out the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in this project so that everyone is clear about their role and aware of the timescales and process within which to operate. The objective of this protocol is to ensure that there is a consistent, fair, accurate and co-ordinated approach to communication relating to the project.

**Background**

This Communication and Consultation Strategy is a key tool for ensuring the smooth running of the project process and keeping all stakeholders appropriately and accurately informed at key stages.

By its nature, the project could become complex and may be confusing for stakeholders. This situation would be made worse if inappropriate or inaccurate information is published or if all stakeholders are not given sufficient time to fully understand the material that has been provided to them.

The protocol seeks to achieve an effective and structured approach to the distribution of information.

**Function**

- To provide an opportunity for different perspectives to be given on draft consultation material and activities
- To ensure staff, Members and possibly Contractors are fully involved in the process
- To ensure that each of the constituent Councils and its representatives on the Steering Group are open and transparent in drawing up consultation material and activities throughout this process.
- To ensure that necessary approvals are given before documentation or activities are published.

**Responsibilities and Roles**

- The Council's nominated representative will approve all consultation and information material, including press releases, which are to be published on behalf of the Partnership.
- Draft documentation must not be disclosed to third parties unless it has been approved for formal consultation purposes. This is because documents may change before they are finalised and distributed and it is important to ensure that agreed and accurate information is provided.
- The Partnership want to ensure that information is clear, simple, factual, open and consistent at every stage and it is only by working through the draft documentation and proposed activities that this can be achieved.
- All parties involved in the preparation and publication of documentation as part of the process will comply with the principles as set out in this protocol.
- The production of documentation for publication and distribution must, at all stages, be agreed by the Steering Group and all other stakeholders prior to its release.

**Council Produced Documentation**

All consultation documentation produced by any constituent Council will be circulated to all other Councils for their information and comments. A period of 5 working days will then be allowed for the receipt of any comments.

Councils will have regard to comments received and copies of any documents subsequently revised will be circulated to the relevant stakeholder groups for information.

**For documentation produced by the Resource Officer (RO)**

Following consultation with the Steering Group, a draft of any published material produced by the RO should be forwarded to the Council's representative for comment.

Any comments in connection with this document should be made within an agreed timescale. The RO will have regard to comments received and copies of any documents subsequently revised will be submitted to the Councils for information. The RO will act as the point of contact to collate and / or disseminate information on behalf of the partnering authorities.

**General Communication Principles**

It is essential that all stakeholders involved in decision making, through membership of formal groups, are allowed sufficient and adequate time to consider the full implications of reports submitted to these groups.

In all but exceptional circumstances, agendas, reports, documents and associated material to be presented to the Steering Group will be circulated 5 working days before the date of the meeting and will therefore need to be provided, in either electronic form or hard copy, to the Council's nominated representative by noon on the day that is one week before the meeting. Points of contact for this purpose are shown at the foot of this Protocol Document and may change from time to time.

All draft materials are to be clearly dated and should include a version number so that everyone consulted is clear as to which version they should be considering.

All documents circulated for consultation should clearly state the time/date by which comments are required.

Any consultation events arranged by either the Council or the RO shall be advertised sufficiently in advance and shall, at the very least, provide the intended audience with at least 7 days prior notice.

Any stakeholder should not answer unsolicited enquiries from the media or interested parties unless the communications consultation process has been followed.

Enquiries received from the media or interested parties by the Councils or any of the other stakeholder group will initially need to be handled via the Council's nominated representative.

Any press briefings, once they have followed the consultation route outlined above, will also be dispatched via the Council's nominated representative.

**Keeping Staff Informed**

The Steering Group recognise that a critical success factor will be keeping staff at the constituent authorities informed of project progress at all stages. It is therefore important that a consistent message is given to the staff of all Councils involved. Where it may not be possible to disseminate information to staff at exactly the same time, this protocol dictates that the constituent authorities should agree to inform staff at various stages in the project and that the message should not be given before the embargo date.

This is in recognition of the fact that no local authority works in isolation and that staff have a well-developed network to exchange information at a professional level. The project could be damaged if the message was inconsistent or given to different staff at different times. Release embargo times may be introduced.

Save for commercial confidentiality. The constituent authorities agree that the project proceeds with an “open book” policy and that staff be kept informed at all stages by:-

Regular Staff Bulletins produced by the Resource Officer

Regular Staff Briefings given by the Steering Group Representative from each authority

The following authorities have agreed to be bound by this protocol

**Chelmsford Borough Council** .....  
**(Nominated Officer - )**

**Colchester Borough Council** .....  
**(Nominated Officer - )**

**Maldon District Council** .....  
**(Nominated Officer - )**

**Rochford District Council** .....  
**(Nominated Officer - )**

**APPENDIX 2**

**Proposed Revenues and Benefits Partnership**



## Background

### *Influencing Factors*

There are a number of factors that have influenced the need for local authorities to look into shared or partnership working:

- An independent review of public sector efficiency was carried out resulting in the Gershon report of July 2004 entitled 'Releasing resources to the front line'.
- In November 2005 the Audit Commission published a report entitled Report "The Efficiency Challenge."
- Nine Regional Centres of Excellence (RCEs) have been established in England. Each RCE has its own business plan to deliver, but all of them are a key delivery mechanism for improving procurement, partnering, efficiency and service delivery across local government. They act as the first line of support and guidance on procurement, partnering and efficiency for authorities in the region.

### *Why has this document been produced?*

This document has been produced to help authorities to work in partnership with one another.

To date, 'exploratory' meetings have taken place between representatives from Chelmsford, Rochford, Maldon and Colchester Council's.

Key functions, services provided and the way in which various processes are currently delivered by each authority have been analysed. This has resulted in an initial 'Scoping Review' for Council Tax, NNDR, Housing Benefit/Fraud, Cost of Services provided, IT, Control & Development, External Contracts and Staff Structures. (See attachment)

The following areas for partnership working have been highlighted:

- Training
- Recovery and Enforcement
- IT and Document Management Systems – particularly testing
- Legislative and other policy issues
- Forms and documents

The group has to date focused mainly on 2 of these areas – training and recovery & enforcement. (See attachments)

A document – 'Protocol for Communication & Consultation' has been agreed by the group – waiting for Steve's amended version.

The four authorities have shown an interest in developing partnership working for a variety of different reasons: (e mailed 4/1/06)

**Maldon –**  
**Colchester –**

**Chelmsford** – In 2005 Revenues and Benefits staff were advised by the Chief Executive of the council that following the Gershon report, the Council would be looking into the possibility of partnership working. "Our primary aim is to improve performance and ensure future resilience whilst at the same time looking to reduce the overall cost of the function in the long term.

"**Rochford** recognises that as a small authority with limited financial and staff resources it has capacity problems in delivering the Revenues and Benefit Service. This was highlighted by a recent CPA inspection. However, it also recognises that there are areas of the service which it delivers well and wants to share this expertise with other local authorities. Members and Officers at Rochford agree that the way forward is to work with a limited number of like-minded authorities to work under a partnership agreement to deliver a common service".

Since February 2005, Chelmsford have been carrying out Rochford's billing and collection of NNDR. This is being progressed further to include Recovery of NNDR.

### ***Progressing the partnership***

At a meeting between the interested authorities on 7<sup>th</sup> December, it was clear that a lot of work is needed before critical decisions can be made on how to progress the partnership.

Each authority has different ideas and opinions on a number of factors, including:

- What does 'partnership' mean - 'joined-up' or 'shared' services?
- Timescales on implementation?
- What are the key deliverables/outcomes?
- Should we go for quick wins?
- What should our long-term aims & objectives be?
- How will the project be resourced – any funding available?
- Telephony/call centres?
- How should the project be structured, how do we get started?

Despite this, a suggested shared vision was agreed:

“To partner one or more local authorities to deliver the Revenues & Benefit service and gain efficiency and make savings”.

It was agreed that the groups Resource Officer 'would look at what other Local Authority Partnerships have done and produce a draft project plan looking at elements, resources etc'.

In light of this, the successful **Anglia Revenues Partnership** has been approached and has very kindly supplied us with the following information to help get us started and move our project forward:

- Business Case
- Terms of Reference and Constitutions
- Options, issues, and task lists
- Structures
- Critical success factors
- Project Plan

Our working document has been structured as far as possible on the Anglia Revenues Partnership model.

## Key Outcomes and Deliverables

At a meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> December, the following mission statement was agreed:

“We are exploring the development of a shared Revenues and Benefits service between Authorities.

We have commissioned a piece of work to scope the project and look at key outcomes/deliverables.”

The advantages of partnership working have been discussed and form the basis of our **possible key objectives**:

1. To improve Revenues and Benefits services for our customers and offer a 'seamless' service
2. To provide a flexible and more resilient service by riding peaks and troughs of service delivery
3. To improve and maintain performance in the Upper Quartile for measurable BVPIs
4. To share knowledge and expertise, increase staff skills and provide staff with career development and other opportunities
5. To reduce costs by sharing through economies of scale and administration
6. To continually develop and improve the delivery of Revenues services for customers

**Potential Advantages and Strengths of Partnership Working**

- Tried and tested by Anglia Revenues Partnership
- All interested authorities use Academy software for Council Tax & Benefits which forms a good 'starting point'
- Improved 'consistent' service for customers
- Improved conditions and development/career opportunities for staff – could result in higher morale, sense of unity, excitement re fresh challenges ahead
- Shared vision and tentative commitment between interested authorities
- Meet requirements of Gershon and Audit Commission recommendations, score points CPA.
- Sharing of knowledge, expertise, skills, career development opportunities
- Economies of scale for joint purchasing and sharing of staff, media & communications, training, external contracts etc
- Cost reduction – staffing, operational/administration, I.T.
- Counter the threat of outsourcing (external companies)
- Project under our control, rather than 'the unknown' being imposed on us
- Unified policies and procedures – greater impact, more efficient
- Current 'wish lists' for individual authorities could be achieved
- Development of current systems & use them pro-actively to full potential
- Improvement and efficiencies could result in joint achievements and/or accreditations for quality, customer service and performance (For example, Chartermark, IIP etc)
- Possibility of different working hours and locations – greater opportunities and access to services
- All authorities are in Essex and within fairly close proximity of each other
- Possibility of funding due to joint initiatives and meeting government requirements

**Potential Barriers and Weaknesses of Partnership Working**

- IT Constraints – varying systems
- Governance – members
- Staff concerns – pay, hours, location, job cuts – could result in low morale or motivation
- Audit
- Public Perception
- Legislation
- Corporate Identity
- Timescales – perceptions between authorities may vary
- Resources/Project teams
- Fear of the unknown – is this the best way forward, what if it fails?
- Unifying policies and procedures – who decides what's best?
- Protectionism
- Existing external contracts
- Lack of expertise in certain areas in each authority
- Lack of resources/budget/funding to improve service delivery/pro-activity

**Scoping the Project**

Before deciding on how to progress the project and explore ways to meet our joint objectives, the following vital elements of the project need to be considered and agreed. Please put an 'X' in the relevant box to indicate if you agree or disagree.

**Vision Statement**

"To partner one or more local authorities to deliver the Revenues & Benefit service and gain efficiency and make savings".

Agree	Disagree	Comments or amendments
X		

**Mission Statement**

"We are exploring the development of a shared Revenues and Benefits service between Authorities.

We have commissioned a piece of work to scope the project and look at key outcomes / deliverables."

Agree	Disagree	Comments or amendments
X		

**Key Objectives**

1. To improve Revenues and Benefits services for our customers and offer a 'seamless' service
2. To provide a flexible and more resilient service by riding peaks and troughs of service delivery
3. To improve and maintain performance in the Upper Quartile for measurable BVPIs
4. To share knowledge and expertise, increase staff skills and provide staff with career development and other opportunities
5. To reduce costs by sharing through economies of scale and administration
6. To continually develop and improve the delivery of Revenues services for customers

Agree	Disagree	Comments, amendments, or if you would like to add further objectives
X		



**Revenues and Benefits Functions**

For the purposes of the scoping exercise and In accordance with the Vision Statement, Mission Statement and Key Objectives, the following functions (including I.T, telephony, customer services, cash/payment collection and training) will be scoped:

Council Tax and Housing Benefit  
Fraud  
Housing Benefit Recovery  
Council Tax Processing  
Council Tax Recovery and Enforcement

It is assumed at this stage that sundry debts, concessionary fares and parking services are not within the scope of the partnership.

Agree	Disagree	Comments
X		Is NNDR in there somewhere as although currently managed by Chelmsford for Rochford it surely should still be included

**Scope**

So that the project scoping can commence, each of these items listed:

- Will need to be broken down into finer detail
- Will need all options for delivery considered (shared, joint or other)
- May need to be phased in over a number of stages and possibly over a number of years
- May require project teams to be set up (shared, joint, or separate)

Scoping item	Agree	Disagree	Comments
Joint committee to oversee service, provide joint vision and policy direction	X		
Shared Academy Revenues ICT suite from one server	X		
Shared ICT data processing	X		
Shared DIP systems	X		
Joint IT support	X		Our IT provider may penalise us for pulling out of contract. The contract ends 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2011
Shared managerial & operational posts	X		
Joint procurements of all third party services	X		Bailiffs as high priority
Unification of processes, working practices and policies on service provision	X		
Shared accommodation and staff	X		
Shared budgets	X		

Scoping item	Agree	Disagree	Comments
Shared postal services	X		
Shared training facilities	X		
<b>If there any items that you would like to be included here, please list them over the page:</b>			

Scoping item	Agree	Disagree	Comments

