

**MINUTES OF A MEETING
OF THE RIDGEWAY SHARED SERVICE PARTNERSHIP STRATEGIC BOARD**

**HELD AT THE CONFERENCE ROOM 1, THE ABBEY HOUSE, ABINGDON
ON MONDAY, 2ND FEBRUARY, 2009 AT 8.30 AM**

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillors Mary de Vere (Chair), Ann Ducker and Jerry Patterson

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Steve Bishop, Steve Culliford, Paul Howden and William Jacobs

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: Nil

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rodney Mann and Capita representatives Sue King and Lisa Galvani.

19. MINUTES

The minutes of the Strategic Board meeting held on 3 November 2008 were adopted as a correct record.

The Chair sought updates on several items that appeared in the minutes:

- In relation to the flooding money, it was noted that this had been received from the Government and paid out in discretionary rate relief
- Regular monitoring reports were being sent to the Board Members on those invoices unpaid after 30 days. The Vale's performance was improving. In the last monitoring report there were only six invoice unpaid over 30 days after receipt
- It was understood that Capita was still conducting a monitoring exercise at Swindon on the best way to manage telephone calls at peak times. Capita's representatives, who had been unable to attend the meeting due to winter weather, would be asked to provide an update
- A review of the Accountancy staffing structure had been deferred until after the budget setting process had been completed

RESOLVED

that Capita be asked for an update on the monitoring exercise at Swindon on the best method to manage telephone calls at peak times.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

21. MINUTES OF THE OPERATIONS BOARD

The minutes of the Operations Board meetings held on 20 October, 17 November and 15 December 2008 were received and noted as well as the draft minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2009.

The Strategic Board asked that, in future, the most recent minutes of the Operations Board should be submitted to the Strategic Board, even if they were still in draft form. It was better to see the latest position.

The Strategic Board asked for updates on several issues that appeared in the Operations Board minutes:

- There had been problems in identifying the roles and responsibilities in the Payroll service. This was now being discussed at meetings of the Operations Board. The intention was to look at this in more detail at a subsequent Board meeting
- It was noted that Lisa Galvani would be leaving Capita on 4 February and her replacement was Darren Keen
- With regard to the Vale Benefit Subsidy Audit 2007/08 the total value of overpayments caused by local authority error had exceeded the Government-prescribed 'lower threshold'. This was despite several warnings to Capita that the threshold might be breached without improvements and despite assurances from Capita that the figures would improve. As a result, the Vale stood to lose £57k benefit subsidy for breaching the threshold. A performance notice had been served on Capita with a demand for £57k compensation. The Strategic Board was not happy with Capita's 2007/08 performance on benefits, noting that there was no improvement to date in 2008/09 with Capita predicting that both councils would exceed the lower threshold and incur subsidy loss. It was reported that there was even the possibility of one or both councils exceeding the Government-prescribed 'upper threshold', which would incur even greater subsidy losses. Members asked that Capita submitted a report explaining the situation and setting out what action it intended to take to resolve the problems. In the meantime, Members asked that Capita's performance was closely monitored
- The overall percentage error rates for benefits had not been received from Capita and this request had been outstanding since last summer. There was some concern at Capita's inability to provide this information. It was hoped that Capita was carrying out the necessary checks but there was no evidence to suggest this was happening. The Strategic Board was concerned at this and requested that the officers formally ask Capita for this information. If this did not bring prompt action then the issuing of a performance notice should be considered as well as seeking a meeting between the Councils' Chief Executive and the Capita chief executive
- It was noted that Capita was involved in the Vale's project to upgrade software for credit card security
- With regard to brown bins, at the Vale there was still an under-recovery of invoices. It had taken some time to synchronise the data between the brown bins management system and the Agresso financial management system. At South

Oxfordshire problems were being experienced with reconciling payments with the correct account due to Capita not printing invoice numbers on the payment slips. Capita was being asked to rectify this error. Internal Audit was also investigating these problems. A meeting was being held between staff at the two Councils to overcome the problems experienced. Members considered that in the longer term both Councils should move to charging the same amounts for the brown bin service and both should offer discounted payment by direct debit or only allow payment by direct debit or online methods

- As part of South Oxfordshire's fit for the future project, it was intended to split housing benefit from the Housing service

RESOLVED

- (a) *that Capita be asked to write a report explaining the reason for the Vale's Benefit Subsidy Audit 2007/08 being over the threshold and setting out what action it intended to take to resolve the general problem of high local authority errors at both councils; and*
- (b) *that Capita be formally asked to provide the overall percentage accuracy/error rates for benefits.*

22. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Strategic Board received and considered the performance monitoring report for financial services across the two Councils.

A year end surplus was being predicted for the collection fund due to good council tax collection rates. The assumed rate of collection was 98% but the actual rate was running higher, giving a buffer against any bad debts and probably leading to a year-end surplus on the collection fund which would be shared with the County Council and the Police authority.

The position with National Non-Domestic Rates was not so good due to some properties being empty. However, it was noted that the business rates payable on the vacant Woolworths stores would have to be paid by the premises owners or leaseholders. In the current economic recession there had been an increase in the number of applications for business rates hardship relief. The Strategic Board urged caution in offering hardship relief and creating precedents as the majority of the cost would fall on the relevant Council.

More concern was expressed at Capita's benefits management; in particular, the figures for case load and number of days per assessment appeared to be inconsistent. The officers agreed to investigate this further.

With regard to the benefits figures included in the table appended to the performance monitoring report, it was noted that these had to be confirmed. The Strategic Board hoped that Capita's new officer, Darren Keen who specialised in benefits management, would bring improvements to this service.

23. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

None

24. **DATES OF FORTHCOMING MEETINGS**

It was noted that the next meeting of the Strategic Board would be held on Tuesday 5 May 2009 (avoiding May Day Bank Holiday Monday) at 8.30am in Conference Room 1, The Abbey House, Abingdon.

The meeting rose at 10.00 am