

Minutes of a meeting of the **Ridgeway Shared Service Partnership Strategic Board**

held at the Abbey House, Abingdon
on Monday 1 March 2010 at 9am

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillors Mary de Vere (Chair), Rodney Mann (Vice-Chairman), and Jerry Patterson

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

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: Nil

8. Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was recorded from Councillor Ann Ducker.

9. Minutes

The minutes from the Strategic Board's meeting held on 2 November 2009 were adopted as a correct record.

10. Declarations of interest

None

11. Urgent business

None

12. Minutes of the Operations Board

The minutes of the Operations Board meetings held on 23 November 2009, 18 January and 15 February 2010 were noted.

Compared to other benchmark local authorities, both South Oxfordshire and the Vale's performance on accuracy of administering benefits claims was still poor. Inaccuracies had led to overpayments. In addition, the speed of administering claimants' changed circumstances was also considered poor. Capita had previously said it could not report on performance of this element. However, it was suggested that the council should set a target for Capita to achieve.

The Audit Commission had criticised both councils on benefits' performance. An action plan to reduce the problems identified by the Audit Commission had been drafted and was appended to the agenda in response to the auditor's report (see minute 13 below).

The board members were disappointed with Capita's continued poor benefits performance in these areas. Members agreed to question Capita about these problems when its representatives were invited into the meeting. It was considered that Capita should be reminded of its contractual obligations to achieve top quartile performance.

With regard to the cash receipting system at South Oxfordshire, the board noted that the unresolved issues would be overcome soon and new procedure manuals implemented by the end of March.

13. Certification of 2008/09 grant claims

The board considered the Audit Commission's reports on the certification of 2008/09 claims and returns by the two councils. The reports stated that neither council had adequate controls in place for the administration housing and council tax benefits, which given the public sums involved (over £20M for each council) was a serious conclusion. Contractual claims would be made to Capita for the councils' resulting loss of government subsidy. It was noted that Capita was still disputing a similar claim for loss of subsidy at the Vale in 2007/08.

Agreed action plans had been prepared in response to the audit reports and these would be implemented with Capita.

The board was disappointed with the audit reports and agreed to raise this with Capita later in the meeting.

14. Performance monitoring

Capita representatives Sue King and Darren Keen were invited into the meeting to report on performance. They highlighted that Council Tax collection rates were high, similar to last year, as was collection of national non-domestic rates.

Turning to benefits, Capita reported that the number of claims had increased in recent months. The speed of administering the claims was now 21 days for the Vale and 23 for South Oxfordshire. This was an improving trend on the year-to-date performance of 25 days for each council.

Changes to a benefits claimant's circumstances (known as changed events) currently took 22 days to administer for the Vale and 26 days for South Oxfordshire. The board members considered that this performance was poor and called for much better performance, suggesting a target of 7 or 8 days was set. Whilst Capita's representatives agreed that the

time taken to process these changes was too long, they did not believe a target of 7 or 8 days was possible without additional cost to the councils. The board members pointed out that the contract with Capita required top quartile performance. The councils expected this level of performance for the current contract consideration. The board considered that a target of 7 or 8 days should be achievable as it had been achieved by Capita previously under this contract and by Capita for other councils too. Capita reported that it would be difficult to set a target at this stage and asked for this to be agreed once data had been received in April. The board disagreed, believing that the two councils must be able to start their new financial years in April knowing what their targets were. The board asked that a lower target was agreed between the councils' client officer and Capita before the end of March. Continuing at the current level of performance was likely to result in both councils being penalised, with likely financial claims to Capita. The board members asked that the target and the payment and performance mechanism were discussed at the next meeting.

The accuracy of processing benefits claims was discussed also. The figures for January had been unacceptably low. Capita's manager apologised for this and was investigating the causes. He agreed to report his findings and resulting actions back to the board. The board noted that February's performance had improved but not to the target level. The board was again disappointed with this performance and reminded Capita of the importance to the contract of improving the accuracy of processing benefits claims. Capita was asked why performance differed between councils across the country. In response, Capita believed that each council had differing demands in checking benefits applications and there was a question over the interpretation of the term "accuracy". The board members advised Capita that the Audit Commission's definition of accuracy was the only definition it should concentrate on. The client officer and Capita were asked to discuss this to fully understand of how the councils' performance should be measured.

Capita was also requested to be more open with its benefits' data. It was noted that Capita's manager monitored performance on a monthly basis. The board suggested that monitoring should be increased to weekly, until performance had improved to target levels. Capita's representatives agreed to introduce weekly monitoring and to find the causes of under-performance. Board members asked for weekly monitoring data on the accurate processing of benefits claims.

Turning to exchequer services, the board noted that performance against the indicator for the payment of invoices within 30 days was still not at target levels. This was to be the subject of a report to the Vale's Scrutiny Committee in March.

RESOLVED

- (a) *that by the end of March 2010 the councils' client officer and Capita be requested to agree a target and payment performance mechanism for changes to a benefit claimant's circumstances and these matters be discussed at the next board meeting;*
- (b) *that the councils' client officer and Capita be requested to discuss the Audit Commission's definition of accuracy and use this as the performance measure; and*
- (c) *that weekly monitoring data on the accurate processing of benefits claims be sent to board members.*

15. Dates of forthcoming meetings

The board agreed to move the date of its next formal meeting to Monday 10 May 2010. This would be held at 9am in the Abbey House, Abingdon.

The meeting rose at 11.21 am