Note on the Informal Briefing from CenSus on the Housing Subsidy Audit
22nd March 2016

Present: Councillors: John Bailey, Leonard Crosbie, Brian Donnelly, Gordon Lindsay, Nigel Jupp, Godfrey Newman, Kate Rowbottom, Stuart Ritchie, Michael Willett, Claire Vickers

Councillor Johnathan Ash-Edwards, Mid Sussex District Council

Officers: Tom Crowley, Chief Executive
Dominic Bradley, Head of Finance

Kathryn Hall, Chief Executive Mid Sussex District Council
Tim Delany, Head of CenSus Revenues and Benefits
Peter Stuart, Head of Finance and HR

- The officers from Mid Sussex District Council were invited to talk to Members about the claim by central government against CenSus and Horsham District Council.

- A comprehensive note had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. The officers talked Members through the note.

- CenSus put emphasis on dealing with new housing benefit claims as quickly as possible; however this is a very complex area with a high transaction rate.

After officers had talked Members through the note, Members were invited to ask questions.

- The CenSus Joint Committee receives quarterly reports from the Head of CenSus Revenues and Benefits. A check and balance system is in place. The Committee provides assurance to the officers; it makes suggestions and challenges the detail. The Committee had reasonable assurances from internal audit during the period. The Committee was satisfied with the robust action plan which had been drawn up for 2014/15 following the 2013/14 qualification.
This area was also monitored by the Accounts, Audit and Governance Committee.

- Best practice: CenSus are seeking to look at this and had begun looking at a London authority.

- Members noted that it was difficult to attract and retain staff in this department. This was a very complicated and complex area and, Members noted that there was a 12 month staff training period.

- Members noted that the introduction of Universal Credit and Digital Tax would change the regime fundamentally. Some of the more complicated areas would no longer exist.

- Members noted that external consultants would be brought in to support the changes arising from the departure of Adur from the Partnership and Adur would be supporting this financially. Consultants were also being brought in to help understand how to shape the service with the introduction of Universal Credit. Finally a consultant would also be employed to look at the accuracy of the CenSus service and give advice on the structuring of the service.

- Digital Tax – Making better use of technology and encouraging the self service of revenues and benefits was hoped to improve the service and reduce the error rate.

- Members asked whether the qualification would be repeated in 2015/16. CenSus was in the process of trialling some IT systems to support the self-service system which should help bring down the error rate in future.

- Members noted that a robust action plan was in place, the system was externally audited and on paper all the correct steps were being taken.

- No changes would be made to the system by the DWP at this stage as the introduction of the Universal Credit was imminent.

Following the discussions and responses to the Members questions and concerns, the group summarised what they would like to see going forward:

1. The result of the external consultants' work
2. The results of the consultants' work on accuracy of the system
3. For the CenSus Joint Committee to consider the pay grade and whether this is right for the role and responsibility of staff
4. For CenSus Joint Committee to examine performance versus target times, and whether this was having an impact on accuracy

5. Ernest and Young's formula and the testing taking place after the annual audit, is the timing of this testing having an impact on the result

Officers would present their results to the CenSus Joint Committee.
They would also come back in 12 months with the results of the consultants' work.

It was also suggested that CenSus salaries be a separate item on the CenSus Joint Committee agenda.