

CenSus Revenues and Benefits Task and Finish Group
12 MARCH 2018

Present: Councillors: Nigel Jupp (Chairman), Tim Lloyd, Michael Willett,
David Coldwell (ex-Officio) and Leonard Crosbie (ex-Officio)

Apologies: Councillors:
Absent: Councillors: Brian O'Connell

Also Present:

13 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

14 **MINUTES**

The notes of the meeting held 6th February 2018 were received.

15 **DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of interest.

16 **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

There were no announcements.

17 **TO HEAR FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE ON CENSUS REVENUES AND BENEFITS**

The Chief Executive had been invited to the meeting of the Task and Finish Group in relation to the Group's concerns about the substantial costs of cleaning up the CenSus Revenues and Benefits database.

Members questioned the Chief Executive, and asked for his view on the reason for the continuation of the increasing costs after the initial problem which occurred in 2013/14.

The Chief Executive explained that it was a failure by Mid Sussex District Council, who was responsible for delivering the partnership, to manage the service in a proper manner.

When the problem was first identified in November 2014, following the emergence of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) audit results, Mid Sussex District Council reported to the CenSus Joint Committee in March 2015 details of an action plan, outlining the measures they proposed to rectify the problems. Following this, after a more substantial problem emerged in the

results of the DWP audit in November 2015, Mid Sussex officers attended a meeting with Members of the Finance and Performance Sub Committee on March 22nd 2016 at which they explained the reason for the continuing problem and gave detailed reassurances about the steps they were taking to improve performance. However despite these reassurances, the DWP audit results in November 2016 revealed that the situation had deteriorated further with a larger financial impact. It was at this point that Horsham began the process of leaving the CenSus partnership.

The Members noted that the first sign of any problems within the service were highlighted by the 2013/14 audit.

The Chairman was concerned about Horsham's officer and member attendance at a number of the CenSus Joint Committee meetings. He referred to the fact that the Horsham Chief Executive had attended regularly until the time that the problem started to manifest itself and asked whether it was a coincidence. The Chief Executive said the two things were unconnected and that the three CenSus Chief Executives had agreed that normally only the host need attend. It was noted that at all the meetings during the relevant period at least one Cabinet Member from Horsham was present.

The Chief Executive explained that the nature of the problem (errors made by CenSus in the calculation of housing benefit payments) had not manifested itself during the relevant years and only became evident at the annual DWP audit. On each occasion it had happened he had raised concerns with the Chief Executive of Mid Sussex DC and asked about what steps were being taken to resolve the problem.

Horsham District Council did not have the right take legal action against Mid Sussex District Council due to the fact that there is no contractual relationship and the partnership is governed by Local Government legislation. This point had been confirmed by the Council's external legal advisors.

The Group noted that there would always be an element of risk when entering into a partnership. Members emphasised the need for clear protocols and measures to be in place with the LGSS and all partners involved with the Council. The Chief Executive reassured Members that our external lawyers and the Director of Corporate Resources had been working diligently to ensure the partnership with the LGSS was on a sound basis.

LGSS had a recognised success record in taking on failing revenues and benefits services and turning them around.

The Group thanked the Chief Executive for attending the meeting.

The Group agreed to meet again on Thursday 29th March at 2.30pm, in order to produce the final report of the Group.

The meeting closed at 5.11 pm having commenced at 4.00 pm

CHAIRMAN