

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 10 December 2015

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 8:12pm and ended at 21:35pm.

***40 Chairmanship of the meeting**

Councillor Roger Giles thanked his fellow committee members, particularly his Vice Chairman, for the work undertaken during the year. He asked the committee, in the interests of team work and to develop the skills of the vice chairman, if they would agree for the meeting to be chaired by Councillor Dent and he would take the vice chairman role.

The committee agreed and Councillor Dent acted as Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

***41 Public speaking**

There were no public speakers.

***42 Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

43 Mill Street Press Release of 17 September 2015

Councillor Cathy Gardner had an raised issue at the October meeting of the committee in relation to the issue of a draft press release to Ward Members shortly before the press deadline. She supplied some specific questions relating to notice, consulting Ward members, urgency and authority to issue.

The responses to her specific questions had been set out in the report to the committee.

She reminded the committee of her concern about the urgency of the press release, which left her with minimal time to respond before it was issued; she also explained to the committee the consequences of the press release, with a knock on effect of adverse publicity. She also felt that the existing media protocol was not fit for purpose.

In response, the Portfolio Holder for Central Services outlined the work pressures of the communications team, and the wording in the current protocol which stipulates that:

“the work of local councillors is recognised as an important contributor to the council’s community leadership role. Ward councillors can be quoted in press releases and can be a contact for the media on initiatives in their ward that promote the policies and services of the council, in consultation with the relevant portfolio holder.”

Both the Portfolio Holder and the Strategic Lead Organisational Development and Transformation stressed the practicalities of dealing with press enquiries. The previous meeting earlier that evening had shown the excellent work of the communications team in dealing with the recycling trial. The example of the particular press release in question did not reflect the service delivery of communications as a whole.

Debate by the committee included:

- the perception of how press releases and subsequent coverage by the media (either quoting in full or in part) may be perceived by the public;
- Involvement of ward members in relevant work was a key factor and responsibility of each strategic lead and service manager;
- So that the communications team can check that ward members have been involved and informed this is an element in the press release template. It includes prompts to help officers build the content of a press release and a reminder about ward member involvement;
- The media protocol itself was based on Local Government Association good practice, and had already been discussed by the committee on the 30 July 2015, where the committee resolved that it endorsed the protocol;
- Options for handling the media including holding statements where appropriate, a practice which is already in place and used where necessary;
- Ward member involvement was taking place, but the communications team were only the conduit – it was the responsibility of officers to ensure that the appropriate member involvement was in place.

RESOLVED

- 1. that the committee reaffirms its endorsement of the existing media protocol**
- 2. that the continued use of a press template for officers in preparing a press release for forwarding to the communications team be welcomed.**

43 Strata Joint Scrutiny Minutes

The committee noted the minutes from the joint scrutiny committee. The Chairman highlighted the recent publication online of the recent meeting held on 3 December 2015.

44 Scrutiny forward plan

Cllr Roger Giles as vice-chairman circulated a letter sent to him relating to the development of Exmouth seafront, to ask the committee of their view towards the request for the committee to look into the matter.

The committee were advised by the Democratic Services Officer that:

- Planning applications cannot be reviewed by the committee as the Overview and Scrutiny (England) Order 2012 prevents it;
- Reviewing any public consultation conducted back in 2012 on a masterplan that had now changed would not be relevant work for the committee to undertake some three years later;
- Questions relating to the issue have already been submitted to full Council on 16 December on the topic and would be answered there.

The Principal Solicitor advised the committee that:

- Litigation relating to the area concerned in the letter was still sub judice, and therefore could not be discussed;
- The constitution prevents the committee from considering planning applications;
- The issue referred to in the letter related to a decision already made by Cabinet and Council;
- Questions relating to the issue had already been submitted to Council on 16 December 2015.

Whilst some members of the committee were keen to discuss the seafront development, including particular aspects of the application that had changed to include residential development, they were again reminded that the committee had no remit to pursue discussions of that nature. Once a detailed planning application was out for consultation, views could be expressed through that mechanism as per the planning process.

In conclusion of the debate, the committee were minded to instruct a scoping exercise for how public consultation is conducted, in light of how they felt previous decisions had been made on a consultation process in relation to Exmouth seafront which received a low response rate. The committee were advised that any scoping exercise was likely to show that under the constitution, this would be likely to fall within the remit of the Overview committee. The committee wanted to explore if the implementation of existing policy was in place.

Members were advised of a training session on the morning of 8 January 2016 to familiarise councillors with the budget book, service plans and links to the Council Plan. This was in preparation for the discussion on the draft budget on the 13 January where the Overview and Scrutiny Committees were asked to recommend a draft budget to Cabinet, with Cabinet's recommendations then being referred to Council in February.

RESOLVED

That a review of public consultation related policy be scoped and reported back to the Committee

Attendance list

Scrutiny Committee members present:

Roger Giles (Vice Chairman)
Alan Dent (Chairman)

Brenda Taylor
Marianne Rixson
Dean Barrow
Bill Nash
Cathy Gardner
Val Ranger
Simon Grundy

Other Members present:

Megan Armstrong
Phil Twiss
Rob Longhurst
Peter Bowden
Peter Faithfull

Officers present:

Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Karen Jenkins, Strategic Lead Organisational Development and Transformation
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance

Committee Members

- David Chapman
- Maddy Chapman
- Marcus Hartnell
- Alison Greenhalgh
- Cherry Nicholas

Other Member apologies:

Chairman Date.....