

## **AST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 17 September 2015**

#### **Attendance list at end of document**

The meeting started at 6.00pm and ended at 8.53pm.

#### **\*17 Public speaking**

There were no public speakers at this point of the meeting.

#### **\*18 Minute confirmation**

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on the 30 July 2015, and of the joint meeting with the Overview Committee on 11 August 2015, were confirmed as a true record.

#### **\*19 Apologies**

In receiving the apologies for the meeting, the Chairman, on behalf of the committee, wished a speedy recovery to Committee member Councillor David Chapman, following recent surgery.

#### **\*20 Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

#### **21 Beach Huts**

On 7 January 2015 Cabinet made a number of resolutions in relation to beach huts. The public were invited to give their views on the proposals by means of an online questionnaire. The Committee considered the Cabinet report and consultation responses. The Chairman and Vice Chairman had also attended a meeting of the Asset Management Forum on the issue prior to this meeting.

Mr Lacey from Seaton, who used a beach hut on the West Walk at Seaton, asked the committee to consider:

- Scope for more beach hut sites, which would help reduce the waiting list and increase income
- Look to a site only option for lease, with the option for individuals to purchase the hut and maintain it
- That it was inefficient and costly to offer up 5 year leases
- Different approach on consultation as the current process had been unsatisfactory

Mr Smith, a Seaton resident, advised the committee that:

- The decision to include NNDR rates was already in place
- A 25 year lease option was not popular, nor was open bidding
- The current arrangement should continue

Mr Hunt, representing a beach hut user group at Budleigh Salterton, asked the Committee to examine the waiting lists as there were individuals signing up for multiple lists.

Mr Taylor, a resident of Axminster who rents a hut at Seaton, asked the Committee to be mindful of:

- Pensioners on a limited budget and the importance of the social element of beach hut use to their lives
- Terms of lease need to be clear
- Sealed bids were not popular

Tom Griffiths, former operator of a beach hut and deck chair concession in Sidmouth, asked the Committee to consider:

- Separate consideration of locations, as each was different
- Sharing of huts amongst families
- Not to use Clifton Beach for additional sites as it was unsuitable due to the nature of the site
- Second storey beach huts to maximise availability in site

The Portfolio Holder for Economy made clear to the committee the role of the Asset Management Forum in considering both the best use of council assets and the social benefit for local communities and visiting tourists. He passed on the apologies from the Chairman of Asset Management Forum, Councillor Geoff Pook, who could not be present for the discussion due to a previous engagement.

Coastal Ward Members shared with the Committee their experiences in their Ward in respect of the demand for beach huts and the responses to the proposals and consultation. Local meetings had taken place, where the Chairman of Asset Management Forum had attended. Many alternative proposals had been brought forward by local residents.

Common issues raised by Ward Members and the committee included:

- Balancing the raising income against pricing people out of renting a site
- Welcoming the time and trouble taken by the Asset Management Forum in attending local public meetings and listening to local views
- Need to consider the complexities of offering the management of beach huts and sites to a town or parish level, including the administrative burden both in time and cost
- Need to listen to town and parish councils on what they would like to achieve or take on, with some towns feeling that not enough discussion on the proposals took place at that level before the consultation began
- Look at increasing sites where local conditions allowed it and where there was clear market demand
- Look at concession options to allow family sharing, and variation in letting terms to permit options for visitors, such as weekly or daily letting for a percentage of sites
- Site only removed a large cost to the Council in erecting, maintenance and dismantling of huts
- Modest increases in charges could bring about sensible returns

The Committee also considered previously circulated research undertaken by Councillor Marianne Rixson, which covered beach huts in neighbouring seaside areas. Although some comparisons could be drawn, the offer in other areas had been maximised to the luxury end of the market in terms of providing electricity and water to the huts. The research did demonstrate that other authorities had maximised their assets for a particular market.

The Chairman raised concern at the level of research undertaken in the original review by CIPFA in that environmental impact had not been taken into consideration, or stakeholders such as Natural England approached at that stage of the asset review. In response, the Deputy Chief Executive explained that CIPFA had not been charged with research in those aspects as this would form part of the process in later formulation of proposals.

Development Management officers are involved with the Asset Management Forum on a regular basis as asset proposals are drafted.

The Committee were keen for consideration to be taken into account in the proposals in key areas such as:

- That moving to site only leases did not disadvantage any section of the community in dealing with their own maintenance of a hut, such as the elderly or disabled
- That ways of managing the lettings should permit the maximum use of the huts throughout the season, which in turn would bring increased social and economic benefits to each location
- Economy of scale needed to be taken into account if offering the service to a town or parish level – at present the Council services covered all aspects of it, from administration to the Streetscene involvement in erection and dismantling of huts
- If moving to a site only proposal, the existing huts should still be viewed as an asset and offered for sale as an income opportunity.

## **RECOMMENDED**

### **that CABINET**

1. consider the requirements of all the community in line with equalities legislation in considering any proposals relating to beach huts;
2. check the validity of waiting lists for beach huts and sites, and that their management be reviewed;
3. confirm to tenants of beach huts and sites that the current arrangements remain in place for 2016;
4. review the hire charges for beach huts and sites on an annual basis;
5. review the decision to establish the £19k sinking fund per annum;
6. consider the difference between town and parish locations be given bearing in mind equality and best value requirements;
7. consider further discussions with town and parish councils on the options of undertaking the management of beach huts;
8. consider increasing the number of sites available and review more diverse letting arrangements;
9. In bringing forward any proposals, consider the wider environment and economic issues.

## **RESOLVED**

1. That the Scrutiny Committee endorses the decision by Cabinet that all beach hut tenants be responsible for their own National Non Domestic Rates payments where applicable;
2. That the Committee receive a progress report on the beach huts and sites proposals by March 2016.

**\*22 Performance Monitoring for first quarter 2015/16**

The Chairman outlined continued efforts to remove unexplained acronyms and have relevant comments, with work by the Democratic Services Officer in discussing the comments with the Strategic Management Team.

The Committee considered the quarterly report, highlighting the following:

- Positive start to the number of affordable dwellings being provided;
- Looking to continued improvement in design of homes in line with guidance from the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE);
- Establish if the Engineering Projects Manager role has been filled;
- With a variation showing on the indicator for the Thelma Hulbert Gallery, establish what suggestions came out of a recent Think Tank on the topic;
- Comparison data with neighbouring authorities showed a similar level in number of days lost due to sickness absence to this authority;
- Number of random licence checks had been identified as an indicator that needed adjustment to take into account regular high workload in the first quarter;
- Concern showing on the roll out of smartphone and mobile working for Streetscene already had action in place to resolve but would be taken to the STRATA Joint Scrutiny Committee to help pursue the issue further.

**23 Election funding financial statement**

The Committee had previously received a financial statement as requested, following a report by the Chief Executive to the July meeting on the local elections in May.

Councillor Ranger re-iterated her point that when election scenarios are rare, in this case with all three elections, it was important to fully review the process, which included the costs.

The Democratic Services Officer advised the committee of the continued work on the preparation of the detailed accounts. She recommended that, once complete, the accounts could be viewed by any Member and, if there was still concern, explore further through the scrutiny channels if the Committee agree to pursue this.

Councillor Ranger asked if the prepared accounts could show the cost of reprinting the postal ballot issue and report this figure back to the Committee.

**24 Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The Scrutiny Committee's forward plan was updated to include an additional report on proposals for changes to how the Committee undertake work, on the back of recent training provided by Westminster City Council received by the Chairman and Vice Chairman. This would go to the October meeting.

In addition, updates on the Tree Task and Finish Forum, and beach hut proposals, would be added to the plan.

**Attendance list**

**Committee Members present:**

Roger Giles (Chairman)

Alan Dent (Vice Chairman)

Maddy Chapman

Alison Greenhalgh

Simon Grundy

Marcus Hartnell

Bill Nash

Cherry Nicholas

Val Ranger

Marianne Rixson

**Other Members present:**

Phillip Skinner

Pauline Stott

Jill Elson

Peter Bowden

Ben Ingham

John Dyson

David Barratt

Brian Bailey

Dawn Manley

Geoff Jung

John Humphreys

Steve Hall

Tom Wright

Andrew Moulding

Mathew Booth

Peter Faithfull

**Officers present:**

Donna Best, Principal Estates Surveyor

Richard Cohen, Deputy Chief Executive

Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead - Legal, Licensing & Democratic Services

Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

**Committee Members apologies:**

Dean Barrow

David Chapman

Cathy Gardner

Brenda Taylor

**Other Members apologies:**

Geoff Pook

Iain Chubb  
Paul Diviani  
Eileen Wragg

Chairman ..... Date.....