

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 18 February 2016

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6pm and ended at 7.55pm.

***45 Public speaking**

Bob Spencer, who would be standing in the Police Crime Commissioner elections in May spoke of the inadequacy of the 101 service provided. He said that the system was failing year on year. Although there was a reduction in calls using 101, answering times had not improved. The issue had been reviewed by the Police Crime Panel (of which Bob Spencer and Councillor Tom Wright were members) over the last three years. Increased funding had not resolved the underlying failure of the service.

In response, the Chairman said that challenging spend of public money was a key role of the Scrutiny Committee and referred to a report from Councillor Tom Wright which drew attention to the Police Crime Panel's concerns regarding the 101 service – it had been discussed at the Committee's October meeting. The Committee would be asked to consider whether to add this issue to its forward plan and invite the Police Crime Commissioner or representative to address the Committee.

Councillor Tom Wright supported the comments made by Mr Spencer. He advised that the Forum had provided anecdotal evidence to support its concerns. A Member of the Committee said that when the Police Crime Commissioner had attended a recent meeting in Exmouth, where he had acknowledged the problem which he said would be addressed.

Condolences

The Chairman extended sincere condolences to Cherry Nicholas and Paul Diviani on their recent loss.

***46 Minutes**

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on the 10 December 2015 were confirmed as a true record.

***47 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

***48 Exclusion of the public**

There were no confidential items which officers recommended should be dealt with in this way.

***49 Matters called in**

There were no decisions made by Cabinet called in by Members for scrutiny in accordance with the Overview Procedure Rules.

***50 Portfolio Holder up-date – Sustainable Homes and Communities**

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Jill Elson to the meeting and thanked her for the full and comprehensive report on her portfolio which had been included with the agenda papers. He said that the service had much to be proud of and invited Councillor Elson to address the Committee in respect of any issues that she would like to underline or add.

Councillor Elson emphasised that the achievements of the service were a team effort. The Councillor team included Pauline Stott (Chairman of the Housing Review Board), Maria Hale (Youth Champion) and David Foster (Health and Wellbeing Champion).

Councillor Elson gave a recent example of how the Councillor team had supported the Shout Event at the Beehive, which had been organised by the Community Development team. She listed other proactive activities and services, which benefited the diverse community.

During discussion and questioning, the following was raised:

- The Housing Officers who provided support in the community were dedicated staff with the skills to deal with people in difficult circumstances.
- The impact of the 1% Government imposed reduction in Council rent was explained and actions taken (lobbying the Housing Minister and securing the support of the local MPs) were outlined. The resultant loss to the Council's Business Plan meant that the Council was unable to add as many houses to its stock as it would like. The actions taken had achieved some amendment in respect of supported housing but the rent reduction remained for other Council housing tenants and those of housing associations. The campaign to influence the Government position continued.
- The average price of property in the area was too high for many to afford. Although affordable houses were being built and the Help to Buy Scheme in Cranbrook was effective, there was still a need for social housing. Sufficient permissions had been given to developers to meet housing need in the area, but they appeared to be pacing development to keep prices up for their own commercial reasons. The definition of affordable housing was a debate that often surfaced and was different across the country. A real difficulty was that the banks were asking for a high deposit, which was often outside the reach of people trying to get onto the housing ladder.
- Members acknowledged the pressure on developers for their contribution to the community infrastructure, which reduced the viability of their development.
- New housing – including in Cranbrook and Colyton – had a high insulation specification, which significantly reduced running costs.
- The report referred to the reduction in the waiting list for housing which was now below 2,900. This was monitored by the Housing Review Board.
- The Council also worked well with private landlords – the Council's Private Sector housing team was proactive in helping to make sure that accommodation was of an acceptable standard.
- There was a growing trend of converting bed and breakfast, and similar accommodation to houses in multiple-occupation. Planning permission was required for 6 individual units or more – such properties would then require inspection by the housing team to ensure that standards were maintained. The Council was in the process of converting a property to 6 individual units for people between 21 and 55 years. The work had included a high level of insulation. Each unit has en-suite facilities with a shared kitchen, laundry and lounge. This was the standard that the Council wanted all properties in multiple-occupation to achieve.
- Rough sleeping – the Council was working closely with Exeter where the problem was more acute. Councillor Elson referred to the excellent Night Stop service and efforts made to help rough sleepers.

The Strategic Lead - Housing and Environment said that although discussion had focused on housing problems, the service was highly regarded by other authorities who acknowledged the Council's housing delivery rate and its proactive work in preventing

homelessness. The increase in affordable homes had reduced the numbers on the housing waiting list. 99.8% of Council rent was collected and the tenant satisfaction record was over 90%

RESOLVED:

1. that the report be noted;
2. that the housing team be congratulated on its significant achievements;
3. that the Committee express its concerns at the failure of the Housing Minister to recognise and address the housing problems faced by EDDC as a result of the imposed reduction in housing rent.

***51 Scope for Dunkeswell and Chardstock Built-up Area Boundary (BUAB)**

Representatives of Chardstock Parish Council had previously asked members to undertake a review of the decision to include Chardstock and Dunkeswell in the list of settlements (within the Local Plan) with a BUAB. The Committee had agreed that this review would take place when the Local Plan had been adopted. The matter was now brought back for the Committee to consider the scope of the proposed review.

The Chairman and Principal Solicitor reminded Members that the review was about the process and not the decision itself or the content of the Local Plan. A draft scope had been included within the agenda papers, together with relevant support details as background, for consideration by the Committee.

Councillor Dean Barrow, Vice Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee advised that SWAP (internal audit – South West Audit Partnership) was to undertake a 20-day review of the Local Plan process – its report would include lessons learnt. He wondered if the Scrutiny Committee's review of the decision process in respect of Dunkeswell and Chardstock would be a duplication and suggested the Committee delay the review until the SWAP report was made available. However, the Committee felt that they were committed to undertaking the review without further delay. The scope of the review would help to ensure that mistakes were not repeated in the future; this was an important role of the Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED:

that the proposed review scope be agreed subject to:

- the background paper timeline including the date of the public hearing when the Inspector heard the contributions from Chardstock and Councillor Ben Ingham,
- the consultees be increased to include the former Dunkeswell ward member, Bob Buxton, Councillor Andrew Moulding (who addressed Council on the issue).

***52 Quarterly monitoring of performance – 3rd quarter 2015/16 Oct – Dec 2015**

The Committee considered the quarterly report, highlighting the following:

- a. Number of households living in temporary accommodation – the Council had access to sufficient levels of temporary accommodation that could be used in an emergency.
- b. Broadband provision needed to comply with the Council's Community Engagement Policy. Discussions at previous meetings had emphasised the importance of recognising the needs of isolated and rural communities and of partnership working.
- c. The Asset Management Forum was currently looking at how workshop unit provision could be increased.
- d. Regeneration in priority towns had not been progressed due to team resources being used on other key projects. What was being done to address this problem? The

Vice Chairman advised that Cabinet, at its February meeting, had supported the recommendation of the Overview Committee to appoint a Research and Funding Officer in the Regeneration and Economic Development team. This recommendation would be determined by Council at its meeting on 24 February 2016 when the annual budget was agreed.

- e. Thelma Hulbert Gallery – Leisure East Devon had decided not to proceed with the Trust proposal. Cabinet had considered a presentation and report on the Gallery at its last meeting. This reflected the new approach which was to increase the commercial viability of the Gallery.
- f. New policy relating to motor homes – a copy of this policy would be forwarded to Committee members for information.
- g. Working days lost due to sickness absence – marked as concern. The Committee asked for comparative data from other authorities to be made available at a future meeting and that the Strategic Lead – Organisational Development and Transformation be invited to the meeting to present the data and answer any questions.
- h. Number of random vehicle licence checks – marked as concern. Councillor Brian Bailey, a member of the Licensing and Enforcement Committee and a hackney carriage licence holder, advised that the delays in vehicle checks were due to changes in DVLA processes and were therefore not within the control of the licensing team. The performance would continue to be monitored.
- i. Percentage of other planning applications determined within 8 weeks – marked as concern although the trend was one of improvement. The problem could be failure in the applicant not negotiating with, or seeking advice, from planning officers. It was suggested that the target for larger applications could be extended to 12 weeks. Now that the Local Plan had been adopted, it should help to accelerate the process but would need time to ‘bed in’. The Development Manager to be asked about temporary staff within his service – had this increased or reduced and what were the future staffing plans.
- j. In-cab solution for the refuse and recycling fleet – achieved – Councillor Tom Wright confirmed that this portable solution was transferrable to the new contractor.
- k. Resolve penetrating dampness issues – housing – marked as concern. The Portfolio Holder - Sustainable Homes and Communities advised that most of the programme of works had been carried out but some major works were still outstanding and being progressed. The 2015/16 winter had been particularly wet resulting in problems of damp and condensation.
- l. To produce town centre and high street resilience strategies – a consultation would be carried out in the Spring in respect of a potential increase in street trading. The wording on the questionnaire needed to be well considered to avoid creating local antagonism.
- m. Undertake fire risk assessments in flats – concern. The Chairman of Housing Review Board explained that the problem was being addressed. Inspectors of the Fire Service had been unable to access some properties due to a proliferation of pot plants and mobility scooters. This problem was being addressed and monitored. The Committee felt that the officer explanation could have been clearer about the problem and the action being taken.
- n. Beach Management Plans – need a progress report.
- o. Seaton Jurassic – to be opened in Spring 2016. Need to monitor visitor numbers against projections.
- p. On-line planning. The public need good quality documents and easy access. What improvements were being made to the on-line planning service (including the search facility)? The Committee understood that town and parish councils were to be given an on-line only service – was this change to be trialled initially and, if so, when was

this going to happen?

RESOLVED:

1. that the provision of Broadband and the importance of engaging with communities be included in the Scrutiny forward plan,
2. that the new policy relating to motor homes to welcome day visitors to East Devon's towns be circulated to the Committee for their information,
3. that the Strategic Lead – Organisational Development and Transformation be invited to a future meeting of the Committee with comparative data from other authorities to outline the current position relating to working days lost due to sickness absence and actions being taken,
4. that the Development Manager be asked to advise on the number of temporary staff now within the service (whether this has increased or decreased) and future plans to improve performance in respect of determining planning applications,
5. that officers take care in preparing the wording of the questionnaire in respect of a potential increase in street trading as this was already causing local concern,
6. that officers provide the Committee with an update on the Management Plans for Seaton, Sidmouth, Exmouth and Budleigh beaches,
7. Seaton Jurassic – the Committee to monitor visitor numbers against projections,
8. Planning on-line – to invite the Economy Practice Manager to a future meeting of the Committee to address concerns raised about the service currently provided, issues around the search facility and plans to only provide town and parish councils with on-line documents on which to submit their comments.

***53 Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The proposed forward plan for Scrutiny was considered – the Overview forward plan had also been included with the agenda papers, for information.

Items were agreed for inclusion:

17 March 2016

Beach Hut update

Chardstock and Dunkeswell Strategy 27 decision debate

14 April 2016

Draft Scrutiny annual report.

Broadband provision. Consider inviting Councillor Ian Thomas (former Portfolio Holder relevant for Broadband) and Phil Twiss (current Portfolio Holder relevant for Broadband).

How we consult and engage with the public – implementation of policy

Future meetings

- Portfolio Holder updates as required
- Review of the production process of the Local Plan.
- Exmouth Sea Scouts hut – update on progress.
- Review of EDDC website – including search engine, comparison with other authorities, and how this reflects the image of the Council.
- Planning on-line – to invite the Economy Practice Manager to a future meeting of the Committee to address concerns raised about the service currently provided, issues around the search facility and plans to only provide town and parish councils with on-line documents on which to submit their comments.
- The Strategic Lead – Organisational Development and Transformation be invited to a future meeting of the Committee with comparative data from other authorities to outline the current position relating to working days lost due to sickness absence and

- actions being taken,
- Seaton Jurassic – the Committee to monitor visitor numbers against projections,
 - Police 101 service – the new Police Crime Commissioner to be invited (after May elections). To include what is expected from the service, and how it needs to be improved to gain the support and faith of the public providing information and needing help.

Attendance list

Scrutiny Members present:

Roger Giles
Alan Dent
Dean Barrow
David Chapman
Maddy Chapman
Cathy Gardner
Alison Greenhalgh
Simon Grundy
Bill Nash
Val Ranger
Marianne Rixson
Brenda Taylor

Other Members present:

Megan Armstrong
Brian Bailey
David Barratt
Jill Elson
Peter Faithfull
Ben Ingham
Geoff Jung
Pauline Stott
Tom Wright

Officers present:

Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor and Deputy Monitoring Officer
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing and Environment
Diana Vernon, Democratic Services Manager

Scrutiny Member apologies:

Marcus Hartnell
Cherry Nicholas

Other Member apologies:

Graham Godbeer

Chairman Date.....