

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 18 January 2017

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 9.00am and ended at 12.55pm. Councillor Roger Giles acted as Chairman for the joint meeting, with Councillor Graham Godbeer acting as Vice Chairman in the absence of Councillor Peter Bowden.

***1 Public speaking**

There were no public speakers at the meeting.

***2 Declarations**

Minute 4: Councillor Jill Elson; personal interest; Community Transport

Minute 4: Councillor Andrew Moulding; personal interest; Trustee of the Axminster Heritage Centre

Minute 4: Councillor John Dyson; personal interest; Trustee of Folk Festival committee

3 Draft service plans for 2017/18

The committees considered the service plans for 2017/18 and discussion arose as follows:

Countryside and Arts

- Separate arrangements for the parking of theatre production staff were in place for the Manor Pavilion car park; with an estimated £10K set up fee to make this car park pay and display, the projected income was between £20K and £30K for first year
- A number of savings had already been incorporated into the service through the Transformation Strategy.

Environmental Health and Car Parks

- In response to comments about difficulties in enforcing dog fouling offences, the committee were reminded about the work of the team to proactively discourage such offences, and that the majority of dog owners in the District were responsible in picking up dog mess;
- Overall the District had a positive record on air pollution and the Honiton air quality management area order may be revoked this year;
- Work continued in reviewing car park charges, considering feedback from users to help establish how to simply as much as possible the charges in the District;
- Every mobile catering business/vendor should be properly registered and are not exempt from displaying a certificate;
- The car park adjacent to the library and surgery in the Blackmore area of Sidmouth, owned by the Council, would be one of the sites considered for taking on to manage more effectively; there was also planned work on the car park at Camperdown Terrace to increase capacity.

Finance

- The suggestion of an additional performance indicator for local land charge searches was made. During 2016, significant delays in the processing of property searches had arisen from a shortage of trained staff. This situation had now been resolved, with an expectation to reach normal processing times by February 2017; however the suggestion was made for the re-introduction of a performance indicator for the Scrutiny committee to monitor.

Governance and Licensing

- A question was posed about where the Council's transparency aims could be found and members where referred to previous Cabinet minutes which reiterated the Council's position on transparency.

Growth Point Services

No specific comments were made on this service plan.

Housing

No specific comments were made on this service plan.

Organisational Development and Transformation

No specific comments were made on this service plan.

Planning

- The percentage of affordable housing delivered should be reported regularly. At present the number isn't recorded as a percentage but could be calculated;
- Review planning application fees and pre-application fees;
- Habitat and flood mitigation measures are very stringent;
- In response to a question about the performance monitoring of the government eight week target for determination of a planning application, the committee were informed that a further systems thinking review has delivered some options for amended working, which is currently being trialed. Until the trials have been completed, the service is not in a position to evaluate if current staffing levels are right to deliver the service and improve on that performance target. The performance monitoring report will also need updating to reflect what the government now requires in reporting performance.

Property and Estates

- Discussions ongoing with the office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, Town Council and other interested parties on the future of the Exmouth CCTV system;
- Staffing issue with service needs resolving to ensure projects are delivered.

Economy and Regeneration

- Future publication to councillors and officer on local economic intelligence possible now that appropriate officer in place;
- Will include in March report to the Overview Committee on Economy the rural economy element expressed by members.

Streetscene

- Report coming forward on public toilet review;
- Service continues to work with Otter Rotters to get an improved collection service of garden waste; if it proves not possible for that organisation to provide a district wide service, other options will be explored;
- Service is working towards a solution to resolve compactor skip drop off of waste;
- DCC recycling credits issue has progressed and a model has been put forward by DCC to deduct any reasonable processing costs and split remaining value 50/50.

RECOMMENDED by the Overview and the Scrutiny Committees that the Services Plans for 2017/18 be amended in light of comments relating to:

- a the addition of a performance indicator for local land charges searches;
- b the addition of an objective to review charges that could be made for planning related activity (this is in line with the Transformation Strategy);
- c Planning's key performance indicator on planning application determination timescales be amended to align to the figures reported to Government;
- d the addition of drafting a rural economic strategy;

and that those reviewed Service Plans for 2017/18 be recommended to Council for adoption.

4 Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets 2017/18

The Cabinet report of 11 January 2017 outlined the financial position with a balanced budget produced in line with the Financial Plan, assuming a Council Tax increase of £5 for 2017/18. The draft budget showed a surplus position.

Included in the draft budget were savings identified through the Transformation Strategy. Three additional bids were presented to the committees alongside the draft budget, for consideration for inclusion.

Council Tax increase

The increase of £5 equated to £290K of income lost if not agreed. Not increasing at this level has a cumulative negative impact on future years.

A suggestion was made for a review of property values against council tax banding, which may reveal more income available.

The committees supported the assumed increase of £5 a year

Additional bids

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Partnerships presented the bid for the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan (GESP) – budget allocation requested of £234,000 one off sum. As set out in the report, this sum represented two posts for three years to enable the planning team to continue the work related to the documents linked to the Local Plan as well as work on the GESP. The timing was key to ensure that the Council was involved in the very early stages of the plan, to both comment and influence the plan as it emerges. The Strategic Planning Committee had recommended that this sum be included in the draft budget in their meeting the previous day.

In response to a comment about ensuring the GESP was properly integrated with the LEP priorities, the Portfolio Holder outlined that the wider area concept of development plans gave a better chance of securing funds from the LEP.

The committees discussed the benefits to early involvement in the process and felt the addition to the budget was necessary.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy presented the bid for the Economic Development Officer – budget allocation requested £38,500 per year. Whilst this was an ongoing cost to the Council in future years, he felt that the post was urgently required to help deliver the work the Council expected.

The committee discussed the benefits of the post in helping to deliver a wider investment by business in the area and the aspirations of the Council to promote local economic growth and productivity, as well as increase the development of employment land and business

premises.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy presented the bid for Additional Resources in Estates Team – budget allocation requested £39,380 per year and one off sum of £22,500.

The additional resources request covered:

- Property Records Officer £22,500 per year;
- Business Administration Apprentice £16,880 per year – expected to be for an 18 month placement;
- Corporate Property Systems Development £22,500 one off sum.

Clarification was sought on the work covered by these additional posts if agreed, and the form of software needed to integrate the property records to help inform all services of the council. Some discussion arose over the existing post, now classed as a Service Lead for Estates and Property Services, which had been uplifted in the budget in order to secure the right candidate in competition with the private sector rate. After debate, the conclusion was to agree to the inclusion of the item into the draft budget, but an update on the success of the expansion of the service would need to come to the Scrutiny Committee at a future date.

Savings identified from the Transformation Strategy

The Cabinet report detailed the agreed savings from the Transformation Strategy where some variance had been calculated from the original budgeted savings.

From this list, the committees sought clarification, including on the following:

- StreetScene - recharge event cost clear up. Members commented on the impact a recharge would make on festival organisers who already faced considerable costs in putting on an event, such as the Ottery St Mary Tar Barrel event, or the Sidmouth Folk Festival. Other events using Council owned land already included an element of the hire fee to cover clear up costs. The total saving identified for this recharge was £9K. The recharge was considered in light of how this cost only benefitted one area of the District; others argued that the benefits of the events outweighed this idea because of the economic benefit to the towns and knock on effect to the District. A suggestion was made to look at recharging an element to mobile food sellers at such events, as a means of recovering part of the cost;
- Homesafeguard – income from fees. The Portfolio Holder for Homes and Communities outlined the work involved in setting appropriate fees, including listening to feedback from tenants and private home users of the service;
- A review of officer travel payments was less difficult to negotiate with staff and unions if the budget pressure was stronger, this is likely to be the case in future years but at this stage, other transformation savings had balanced the budget for 2017/18.

Application for capital grant from the Axminster Heritage Centre

A grant request of £50K from the Axminster Heritage Centre had been included in the draft Capital Budget 2017/18, but highlighted for discussion because the grant related to an asset that was not owned by the Council.

Councillor Andrew Moulding spoke about the developing work in regeneration of Axminster, with the Heritage Centre being a key part of the development of the town centre. He outlined some of the offer of the centre and the benefits of it to both the local community and visitors to the area.

The centre was also adept at sourcing other funding, and was unlikely to spend this grant unless other funding bids proved successful.

Members of the committees questioned why an asset not belonging to the Council should be linked to the capital programme. The committees agreed that in this instance, the grant should be included, but supported the suggestion that the Audit and Governance Committee should review how such applications are considered to be included within the capital programme.

Budget book queries

Clarification was sought on a number of elements of the draft budget detail. In response to those queries:

- Markets variance under the Economy portfolio related to the reduction of market activity for the council now being just the market building in Sidmouth town centre;
- The variance for the AONB and countryside teams related to the additional contribution towards the habitat mitigation wardens;
- Income for the sale of the Knowle building was set out in the capital programme financing: in year capital receipts General Fund.

RECOMMENDED by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees:

1. that the Council increases the Council Tax for 2017/18 by £5 per year;
2. that the draft Capital Budget for 2017/18 be recommended to Council and the committees support the inclusion of the Axminster Heritage Centre grant of £50K.
3. that the draft Revenue Budget for 2017/18 be recommended to Council, subject to the inclusion of:
 - a) Greater Exeter Strategic Plan £234,000 one off sum;
 - b) Economic Development Officer £38,500 per year;
 - c) Property Records Officer £22,500 per year;
 - d) Business Administration Apprentice £16,880 per year – expected to be for an 18 month placement;
 - e) Corporate Property Systems Development £22,500 one off sum;

and the deferral of the transformation strategy saving relating to Street Scene - recharge event cost clear up, until a review of the implications of the recharge by the is undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee, and their recommendations considered.

RECOMMENDED by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees to the Audit and Governance Committee that a review of the procedure for considering capital grants for assets not owned by the Council being included in the Capital programme, be undertaken.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee receive an update report from the Estates Team on the work of their service one year after the recruitment of the Property Records Officer and Business Administration Apprentice, subject to the agreement of those posts being included in the Revenue Budget for 2017/18 by Council on 22 February 2017.

Attendance list (present for all or part of the meeting):

Committee Members present:

Roger Giles
Graham Godbeer
Simon Grundy
Dean Barrow
Mike Allen
Marianne Rixson
Marcus Hartnell
Bill Nash
Bruce De Saram
Maddy Chapman
Cherry Nicholas
Peter Faithfull
Rob Longhurst
John Humphreys

Other Members

Ian Thomas
Iain Chubb
Andrew Moulding
Tom Wright
Jill Elson
Philip Skinner
Phil Twiss
Paul Diviani
John Dyson
Geoff Jung

Officers present:

Richard Cohen, Deputy Chief Executive, Development, Regeneration and Partnership
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead - Finance
John Golding, Strategic Lead – Housing and Environment
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead – Governance and Licensing
Ed Freeman, Service Lead – Planning Strategy and Development Management
Charlie Plowden, Service Lead – Countryside and Leisure
Laurelie Gifford, Financial Services Manager
Donna Best, Principal Estates Surveyor
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Apologies:

Mark Williams, Chief Executive

Alan Dent
Cathy Gardner
Val Ranger
Peter Bowden
Ian Hall
Pauline Stott

Chairman

Date.....