

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Extra Ordinary Meeting of the Council held at Knowle, Sidmouth, on Wednesday, 3 June 2015

Attendance list at the end of document.

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 8.10 pm

***20 Introduction by the Chairman**

The Chairman advised that this Extra Ordinary meeting had been requested in accordance with the Council's Constitution by five elected members, namely, Councillors Cathy Gardner, David Barratt, Matt Booth, Matt Coppell and John Dyson.

The reason for the meeting being called was to debate a single motion. As the motion was to rescind a previous decision made at a meeting of Council within the past six months, the motion was required to be signed by at least 15 members of the Council (Council Constitution 13.1). This had been duly done.

The Chairman advised that public speaking at the start of the meeting would be limited to the single issue of the agenda - the Office Relocation motion.

***21 Public Speaking**

The Chairman welcomed those present and invited members of the public to speak to the Council.

Honorary Alderman David Scott referred to all that had been written and said on the subject of the motion, specifically letters and articles in the local press. One of the letters had been submitted by a former employee of EDDC; Hon Alderman Scott emphasised the importance of proper consideration being given to the staff. He said that the Knowle building had reached its sell-by-date and likened it to the Elizabeth Hall in Exmouth. This had generated much public opposition when threatened with closure and later demolished - but had subsequently been replaced with a popular and attractive hotel, which was an asset to the area.

Julia Harbour endorsed the motion and asked the Council to undertake further investigation of the proposed move. Mrs Harbour said that the decision made to sell the Knowle and relocate had been made with unseemly haste before the May elections without adequate public consultation or full consideration of the letters of objection. She said that the financial detail should be analysed in detail and that architectural drawings of the proposed new building at Honiton needed to be produced and made public. She anticipated that the predicted borrowing level would inevitably increase. Reference was made to the cost of borrowing, the fact that the project was not cost neutral and anticipated reorganisation of local government.

Richard Eley supported the well-worded motion. He said that the project should have been properly challenged and transparent throughout. All Councillors should have been fully informed of the terms of sale, with the whole Council critically reviewing all elements. He said that the lower main car park was not achieving full market value. The car park would be an asset to the town, benefiting the local economy. Mr Eley said that Sidmouth was being expected to pay for everything. The Council was retaining the loss making Thelma Hulbert Gallery but proposing to dispose of a valued asset – the car park at Knowle. He believed that the best

plan would be to dispose of loss making assets and retain those which were low maintenance but which had the potential to generate significant income.

Mike Temple welcomed the motion as printed. He said that the relocation process had not been democratic or transparent. He did not believe that all Councillors had been aware that the lawned terrace and garden preparation area had been included within the Knowle development site. He said that these areas had been covertly included by officers with no records being kept. All Councillors and the public should have been made aware of this change, which should have been advertised. He said that the Council had dismissed local objections as of no account and no steps had been taken to replace the proposed loss of open space. He asked the Council to reconsider its previous decision and to do so with greater transparency.

Paul Freeman referred to the comments he made at the Annual Council meeting on 27 May in respect of the outcome of the Freedom of Information appeal. He repeated that this had brought the Council into disrepute and the Judge's comments reflected a serious problem that went to the heart of the Council. He said that the Council needed to be fully investigated and that the review should not be undertaken by the Council's own legal team but by an independent external body to avoid any conflict of interest.

The Chairman stopped the speaker at this point due to Mr Freeman's tone and the accusations he was making.

Jacqueline Green referred to Hugo Swire's request that the relocation decision be put on hold to await any changes to local government following the May elections. The MP had asked the Council to reconsider its position and explore alternative, more cost effective ways of using the Knowle site. It was possible that the tier of district council could be lost during a reorganisation. Times had changed since the proposal to relocate was first mooted.

In response to the issues raised, the Chief Executive gave reassurance that opinion had been widely canvassed and debated in the Chamber – past minutes and press releases were available. This had included the lower car park and effective delivery of services. Exmouth and Honiton were strategically and operationally well placed within district and were the most appropriate locations for future delivery of services.

***22 Declarations of interest**

There were none.

***23 Motion – sale of the Knowle**

“This Council resolves to suspend all processes relating to the sale of the Knowle site for six months so that the following matters can be fully addressed:

1. Development of comprehensive plans to show the distribution of services between the two proposed offices and the impact of this on staff, service users and residents;
2. Comprehensive EDDC staff consultation on the specific details and impact of the proposed office relocation to Honiton and Exmouth;
3. Full public consultation (three month process) on the proposed option;
4. Open invitation for an examination of further options for office refurbishment and location, including those which could be cost neutral, by a sub-

- committee comprising of at least 12 elected members with cross-group proportional representation;
5. Fully costed proposals for the entire relocation process including the new build, refurbished premises, removal, parking, equipment and facilities. To be prepared, reviewed and approved by full Council;
 6. Detailed consideration by full Council of the implications and ramifications of the recent Freedom of Information (FOI) cases.”

As the motion was to rescind a previous decision made at a meeting of Council within the past six months, it was required to be signed by at least 15 members. (Council Constitution 13.1)

Motion proposed by Councillor Cathy Gardiner, seconded by Councillor Matt Booth and supported by Councillors:

Megan Armstrong, David Barratt, Susie Bond, Matt Coppel, John Dyson, Peter Faithfull, Roger Giles, Ben Ingham, Geoff Jung, Rob Longhurst, Dawn Manley, Val Ranger and Marianne Rixson.

In proposing, Councillor Cathy Gardner, called on the Council to allow the relocation proposal to be reconsidered. The new Council would bring a new and different perspective to the debate. Councillor Gardner was concerned about the processes that had been adopted and the apparent secrecy involved – this had aroused suspicions. Only a limited number of Councillors had been involved in the relocation decision process and she believed that the people of East Devon deserved the decision to be made by all Councillors based on the full facts - the Council would benefit from the six-month delay proposed in the motion. Councillor Gardner said that the aims of the relocation project were unclear and had been inconsistent over time. She wanted up-to-date and far-reaching consultation with residents and employees to be undertaken on a regular, on-going basis. She highlighted the importance of democracy and transparent decision-making and for everyone to understand why decisions were made. The initial proposal was for the relocation to be cost neutral but this was no longer the case. Councillor Gardner anticipated that the reorganisation of local government was inevitable and this cast doubt on the need for new purpose-built offices to accommodate the district council.

In seconding, Councillor Matt Booth, referred to changes in the political landscape since the May 2015 elections. He said that the motion was not a single issue or just about Sidmouth but was about the processes underpinning the Council. The Council needed to be accountable, open and prepared to listen – in accordance with its Council Plan. He questioned the lack of transparency and details of costs, how decisions were made and by whom. These were important questions to ask and everyone deserved full and helpful answers. He understood that Sidmouth Urban District Council's intention, when transferring the Knowle to EDDC, was that it would be returned to the people of Sidmouth if the local authority no longer required the accommodation. He asked for full scrutiny of the facts and for the March decision to be reviewed. He invited open consideration by all Members and for this to be reflected in their vote on the motion.

During the debate, issues raised in support of the motion included the following:

- That serious consideration be given to alternative options – including use of Exmouth Town Hall plus part of the Knowle buildings instead of moving to Honiton. This would address current and future needs at a lower cost.

- There were major risks involved in a project of this size, which involved significant borrowing over a period of 20 years.
- Some concerns raised at the combined meeting of the Audit and Governance and Overview and Scrutiny Committees, including overage, had yet to be addressed.
- The relocation project was progressed by only a handful of Councillors but all Councillors should have been involved in the process.
- The public had not been kept informed on the detail of the relocation – residents and members of staff should have been fully engaged in the process as the decisions directly affected them.
- There had been insufficient consultation with staff.
- The move will devalue the Council's fixed assets.
- The proposed open plan arrangement and reduced office space was likely to cause an increase in staff stress, absenteeism and consequent higher recruitment costs. Open plan working was distracting and stressful.
- The Council's opposition group was taking proper measures to review the decision made; the group felt that the decision had been rushed. The Council now needed to be seen to be doing the right thing and following best practice.
- The Town Hall, Exmouth was not an adequate building for a modern office and parking was an issue.
- The other users of the Town Hall needed to be consulted.

During the debate, issues raised against the motion included the following:

- Continuing to remain at the Knowle was putting pressure on budgets due to the on-going high cost of management and maintenance. This was putting the Council's ability to retain and deliver high quality services at risk.
- the Council had been over-cautious with information for fear of jeopardising the sale of the Knowle.
- Parkland and the bottom car park would be gifted to Sidmouth.
- The Knowle building was unsuitable and a drain on public money.
- In the event of re-organisation, the Knowle would be deemed unsuitable in terms of location and flexibility. Negotiations for its future development/use were unlikely to be as favourable to Sidmouth as those which were currently proposed.
- Internal and external audits had been thoroughly carried out. The audits had addressed risks and identified savings that would be achieved through relocation from year one of the move. The audit work had considered the Council's reputation and governance issues and had given the project a seal of approval.
- There had been cross-party debate on the proposed relocation.
- There was an established need to relocate and this should be accelerated if possible.
- Staff wanted the Council to make a decision and act on it – the indecision was de-motivating. The Council had a duty of care to its staff.
- The relocation would provide modern office space, improve service provision and access.
- An increased presence in Exmouth would benefit the largest centre of population in the district and was welcomed. Ideally, this element of the project should be brought forward.
- Geographically, Honiton was the centre of the district and therefore the right location for the main office headquarters of the Council.
- Talk of local government reorganisation was hypothetical – the political landscape following the May elections had not significantly altered.

- The public were largely unconcerned about the site of the Council offices - people just wanted good service delivery and budgets controlled.
- The move would facilitate modern ways of working which would take full advantage of technology.
- Open plan office space was a modern and effective way of working.

The Chairman and other experienced Councillors spoke positively about the contributions made to the debate by newly elected Councillors.

Councillor Tom Wright moved and Councillor Eileen Wragg seconded that the motion as printed be put to the vote and asked for this to be a recorded vote.

Those in favour: Councillors Megan Armstrong, David Barratt, Susie Bond, Matthew Booth, Peter Burrows, Matt Coppell, John Dyson, Peter Faithfull, Cathy Gardner, Roger Giles, Ben Ingham, Geoff Jung, Rob Longhurst, Dawn Manley, Val Ranger, Marianne Rixson (16)

Those against :Councillors Paul Diviani, Mike Allen, Brian Bailey, Dean Barrow, Peter Bowden, Colin Brown, Paul Carter, David Chapman, Maddy Chapman, Iain Chubb, Jill Elson, Steve Gazzard, Graham Godbeer, Pat Graham, Alison Greenhalgh, Simon Grundy, Maria Hale, Ian Hall, Steve Hall, Marcus Hartnell, Mike Howe, Douglas Hull, John Humphreys, David Key, Jim Knight, Andrew Moulding, Bill Nash, Cherry Nicholas, John O'Leary, Pauline Stott, Brenda Taylor, Ian Thomas, Phil Twiss, Mark Williamson, Eileen Wragg, Tom Wright, Helen Parr, Stuart Hughes (38)

Absentions (0)

The motion was therefore lost.

Attendance list

Councillors present:

Mike Allen
Megan Armstrong
Brian Bailey
David Barratt
Dean Barrow
Susie Bond
Matthew Booth
Peter Bowden
Colin Brown
Peter Burrows
Paul Carter
David Chapman
Maddy Chapman
Iain Chubb
Matt Coppell
Paul Diviani
John Dyson
Jill Elson
Peter Faithfull

Cathy Gardner
Steve Gazzard
Roger Giles
Graham Godbeer
Pat Graham
Alison Greenhalgh
Simon Grundy
Maria Hale
Ian Hall
Steve Hall
Marcus Hartnell
Mike Howe
Stuart Hughes
Douglas Hull
John Humphreys
Ben Ingham
Geoff Jung
David Key
Jim Knight
Rob Longhurst
Dawn Manley
Andrew Moulding
Bill Nash
Cherry Nicholas
John O'Leary
Helen Parr
Val Ranger
Marianne Rixson
Pauline Stott
Brenda Taylor
Ian Thomas
Phil Twiss
Mark Williamson
Eileen Wragg
Tom Wright

Honorary Aldermen:

Graham and Ann Liverton
David Scott

Officers:

Mark Williams, Chief Executive
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead – Finance
John Golding, Strategic Lead - Housing
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead – Legal and Democratic Services
Karen Jenkins, Strategic Lead – Organisational Development
Amanda Coombes, Democratic Services Officer
Steve Pratten, Relocation Manager
Diana Vernon, Democratic Services Manager
Hannah Whitfield, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor apologies:

Alan Dent
David Foster
Christopher Pepper
Geoff Pook
Philip Skinner

Honorary Aldermen apologies:

Margaret Rogers

Chairman

Date