

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 5 September 2019

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00am and ended at 4.40pm.

1 Public speaking

There were no public speakers at the meeting.

2 Welcome by Chairman

The Chairman, Councillor Alan Dent, welcomed Councillors and Officers to the meeting. He reported that the priority for Scrutiny was the services provided for the Council and that this was a briefing meeting to form our minds for the budget for the following year 2020/21, for which a meeting would be held in January 2020. This meeting would be chaired by Cllr Nick Hookway, Chairman of Overview Committee.

3 Declarations of interest

Cllr Ian Hall; minute 6; Personal interest, chairman of Cloakham Lawn Sports Centre and Devon County Councillor
Cllr Eleanor Rylance; minute 6; Personal interest; Member of Broadclyst Parish Council

4 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

5 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential items.

6 Service Plan Objectives 2019/20

The Chairman welcomed the Strategic Lead Finance to open the meeting with an overview of the budget position in the context of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and the main factors influencing this and future budgets. This showed that if no action was taken the Council would be spending £2.1 m over the monies it had available to it in 2020/21. This funding gap grew each year and in 2023/24 the final year of the new Council the annual gap is £2.7m. It was noted that the Council will take action to reduce its annual expenditure/increase its annual income in order that it can prepare balanced budgets through the term of the new Council.

Members noted that a way forward to bridge this funding gap along the theme outlined previously in the Council's Transformation Strategy, to focus on the following areas: commercialisation, an organisation fit for purpose and our 'careful choices' strategy.

[Finance service plan](#)

Councillor Ian Thomas reported that a balanced budget was important and that the current budget made no account for the cost implications for the carbon reduction initiative. Other comments on the service included the following activities:

- Transformation Strategy was looking at ways to change the cost shortfall.
- Fraud and compliance initiatives.
- Band discount scheme for council tax.
- Maintain compliance and legality.
- Audit & Governance function.
- Treasury management.
- Importance of Capital Strategy & Allocations Group. This Group had an important function in looking at capital projects.
- The Budget Working Party – the meeting was needed to provide the right information when looking at capital projects.

Clarification and debate covered:

- Concern that the CAB budget provision had been reduced by £20k. It was noted that there was currently some duplication where payments were made to the Homemaker service and CAB will be asked to cover off this work going forward to reduce the overall cost to the Council.
- The Queens Drive Delivery Group had been specifically appointed to deliver the projects at Queens Drive.
- An annual estimate was made on how much income could be obtained from business rates.

Organisational Development & Transformation service plan

Councillor Jess Bailey reported that the three key things to underpin the service plan were:

1. Evolution of the transformation strategy into a commercialisation strategy.
2. Next year looking at the 'careful choices' campaign to consult on services bearing in mind the economic climate.
3. Fit for purpose coming through for the transformation strategy.

Karen Simpkin, Strategic Lead Organisational Development reported that the key challenge for the service plan was moving towards a digital East Devon. The first steps had been introduced which would ask customers to enter through a portal. Similar systems were being introduced in Teignbridge and Exeter. Aligned to this was the content on the website. EDDC's was a big website with a lot of content. The Action Plan was to review this on a monthly basis.

Another element was keeping the show on the road, HR and payroll were important backroom functions which keep the organisation going. There were 500 staff at EDDC and this was looked after by a small number of HR and payroll staff. It was noted that EDDC's staff attrition rates were in line with other public sector organisations and absence rates, once the long term absences were removed was 8 days, which was in line with the public sector average.

Other new initiatives were the upgrade to the Trent system, introducing an upgraded learning management system and achieving the platinum Investor in People award.

Clarification and debate covered:

- What was the % terms for sickness? Sickness rates at the Council were always measured in days.

- Do you undertake early intervention for staff sickness? There was a trigger and then staff underwent a formal absence management and if necessary HR were involved. It was confirmed that sickness was managed very robustly
- It was important that the Council was a good place to work and a supportive environment.
- Are there back to work interview undertaken for all staff sickness absences? Back to work interviews were supposed to be done for each sickness absence and were a vital management tool.
- The attrition rate for staff was 12% and Karen Simpkins confirmed she would like to see it reduced to 10% and it was expected to come down now staff were settled at Blackdown House.

Governance & Licensing service plan

Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead Governance & Licensing reported that there were several different elements to his service – legal, democratic services and information and complaints. There were also other roles involving the Monitoring Officer and Data Protection Officer. Licensing came under the Environmental Health portfolio. This was a support service with Licensing the only customer facing service. The three priorities were

1. Customer support
2. Deliver Statutory functions
3. Protect Council's interests

The challenge and issues that were facing the business were issues particular surrounding the need to reduce costs. It is a relatively small team and any staff reductions would impact on service delivery. The sharing of services maybe something to look at and IT software changes, such as Modern.Gov maybe a way to achieve further efficiencies. New case management software for the Legal service was also being introduced.

The Bosch system was being investigated along with Modern.Gov software as there were a number of useful features, such as electronic voting, that had not been used yet.

The review of the Council's governance arrangements was also likely to have an effect on staff resources needed.

Clarification and debate covered:

- Was CCTV for taxis a possibility? The Licensing Authority was aware of this request, but there were issues to overcome regarding putting CCTV in taxis.
- Was the new IT system for cemeteries being introduced? It was in the process of being implemented.
- Had there been an increase in FOI requests? The trend would show a reduction but there had been a change in the way they were reported. The work the Council was doing, such as relocation or Queens Drive developments drove these requests.
- Does the service have any scope for earning money? The legal department had some potential but this would mean additional staff and considerable work in setting up fees and charges and protocols.

Property & Estates service plan

Councillor Geoff Pook, Asset Management Portfolio Holder, reported that the top three priorities were

1. Corporate Management of Assets
2. Commercial Investment Fund
3. Asset Devolution Policy

Tim Child, Property & Estates Manager reported that the service consisted of the Estates Team who were chartered surveyors, the Property Services team who dealt with planned and reactive maintenance and health & safety compliance and the Facilities Management team which looked after a number of different tasks.

There was the need to improve the strategic management of assets to support the Council's wider business aims. The Commercial Investment Fund had been affected by uncertainty around Brexit.

Clarification and debate covered:

- When will the Asset Register be completed? It had improved a lot in the past few years but was still not completed. It would be nice to think that it could be finished in 12 months' time.
- Are you making good headway in the devolution of Council assets and the streamlining of this? The AMF had discussed this earlier in the week and agreed the first stage of the Beer pilot.
- Has the recent vandalism of Council assets affected the cost of insurance cover? There had been no implications on insurance cover so far, but the insurance cover was provided on a three year term.
- What progress had been made with the commercial investment initiative? It was a difficult at the moment finding suitable investments. There was one property nearing completion and when it was completed then we can go public with a report.

Planning & Planning Policy service plan

Ed Freeman, Service Lead Planning Strategy and Development Management reported that the services top three priorities, issues and challenges were:

1. Housing Delivery – To ensure that we have a ready supply of housing sites to meet the housing needs of the district.
2. Development Plan – To develop a clear strategy for the future development of the district including the delivery of homes, jobs and infrastructure.
3. Flexible working – improve service provision and deliver efficiencies through increased mobile working.

It was noted that the New Homes Bonus provided £1.5m of extra income for the Council each year, but the housing land supply was diminishing each year. The service was developing a house design guide, including environmental standards for new homes.

Clarification and debate covered:

- Need for improvement of plans on the website. A number of plans received in the last couple of months for developments that were of a poor standard and could applicants be informed that these were unacceptable? Plans need to be too scale and to show the information needed.
- There were greater attempts being made to engage the community when spending S106 monies.

- Issues around viability issues around housing delivery and affordable housing. Was anything we could do to strengthen this? A Housing Delivery Officer had been appointed to negotiate the best possible outcomes. There was also a policy regarding overage clauses and the CIL charging schedule is currently being consulted on following a review to take account of current viability.
- Investment in the Housing Company was delayed by relatively few sites coming forward.
- Why is there an additional charge for on line planning applications? The Planning portal imposed charges which we have no control over.
- There was preliminary work being undertaken to update the Local Plan
- Could grid references be added to plans to help Parish Council's better identify where sites were? This would be feedback to the Planning Team but all applications should be accompanied by a clear location plan to ensure that sites could be easily identified.
- Regarding the Five Year Land Supply, are we left with the less desirable sites? It was inevitable that the good sites would be built on we have to look at the less desirable sites.
- Will the Design Code include environmental standards? Yes this would be addressed in design guidance to achieve better outcomes but the guide cannot change policy. It can only provide guidance to expand on existing policy requirements.
- There was new Government guidance which put viability issues at the forefront of work. It was hoped to pick this up at the earliest stage.
- There was the need to build resilient communities and not store up problems for future generations.
- What were the chances of changing planning policy to include wildlife corridors? Our approach can only be changed through new policy as part of the local Plan Review. The service was trying to negotiate the best solutions we can within the current policy framework.
- A review of the Local Plan would be likely to take at least 3-4 years as a result of the work involved including consulting and engaging with our communities.

Regeneration & Economy service plan

Councillor Kevin Blakey, Portfolio Holder for Economy reported that the services top three priorities were:

1. Exmouth Regeneration – Delivery of phase 3.
2. East Devon Business Centre extension and additional locations in East Devon.
3. 'Our Town's' Study and Delivery Plan – Detailed and consultative evaluation of East Devon towns and intervention opportunities.

Members noted that the previous evening Cabinet had appointed a Queens Drive Delivery Group to replace the Exmouth Regeneration Board. It was also intended to have an in depth study of our 8 towns and their needs.

Clarification and debate covered:

- Seaton Regeneration seemed to have stalled. The Town Council had been working on the Seafront Enhancement Scheme, which had funding implications of £4m. Engagement with the Moridunum was acknowledged as an important part of Seaton seafront enhancement.

- Bidding for Coastal Communities Funding need to be carried out in collaboration with Seaton Town Council and more information was needed to improve future bids.
- There was a lot of knowledge amongst Councillor to help with the Town Centre study and the importance of obtaining data from local stakeholders, including Town Councillors was acknowledged.
- When was it intended to start and finish the town centre study as many town centre businesses were suffering? It was hoped to present a report to Cabinet by October and ask for tenders from consultants as soon as possible after.
- It was hoped that Exmouth would be considered as a whole and not just the Queens Drive development and the rest of the town not forgotten as other things in the town needed regenerating.
- Need to engage with local people on the town centre study. Support would be given to community organisations to help with the town centre study. Local engagement and intelligence was vital to the project.
- Hope that the implications of the GESP had been considered to develop the towns.

Growth Point service plan

Councillor Kevin Blakey, Portfolio Holder Economy reported that funding for two thirds of the Growth Point team came from non-core funding. There was also a Strategic Delivery Board being established for Cranbrook. Thee three service priorities were:

1. To deliver the Enterprise Zone programme.
2. To deliver the Green Infrastructure and Habitat Mitigation Strategies.
3. To ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to support the delivery of key strategic sites.

Clarification and debate covered:

- How does development at Cranbrook and the Growth Point benefit the wider East Devon community? The higher earners in this area spent money in the rest of the district. This was trickle-down economics.
- The target of 10,000 jobs in the Growth point was acknowledged. But what had been the actual delivery of jobs so far? There had been in the region of 1,000 jobs delivered so far.

Streetscene service plan

John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health & Environment reported on the impact of the climate change agenda on the four services he managed and other Services, and the challenges and opportunities there were to influence the Council's climate change outcomes. It was suggested that this could be viewed as the Council's greatest challenge that will need sustained efforts over several decades.

Climate Change has recently been adopted by the Council as a priority, and will need to be reflected more prominently in the next iteration of Service Plans.

Andrew Hancock, Service Lead Streetscene services reported that the three service priorities were:

1. Recycling & Waste.
2. Grounds Maintenance & Cleaning of the public realm.

3. Coastal Defence & Asset Maintenance.

The service had a £9m spend, the biggest in the Council and the recycling contract generated £2m of income. The recycling rate was now up to 60% which made the council the top recycling authority in Devon.

The visibility of the Service was highlighted and the contribution towards the outstanding environment priority the council has adopted.

Clarification and debate covered:

- What happens to our recycling when it left East Devon and goes to other areas? The infrastructure does not exist to deal with the recycling in the South West, but it is all dealt with in the UK.
- What progress was being made on recycling other plastics that were not currently able to recycle? It was not easy to recycle these plastics and not commercially viable.
- What progress was being made on On-Street recycling? It was in the service plan and work on this was in-progress.
- The Government was proposing to make the collection of Green Waste a free service. The government strategy had indicated that Council's would be compensated for the costs of this but not for any surplus they made from their current Green Waste scheme. This would reduce EDDC's income generation.
- There were some things that could not currently be recycled. Were the service looking at increasing the things that could be recycled? The service were not looking at doing this as these items could be sent to the waste to energy plant in Exeter and this was a more carbon efficient way of dealing with this items.
- The Council's Green Waste scheme was been effective in carbon reduction as it had reduced car journeys to recycling centres.
- Fly tipping – could Town Council employees be given dispensation to deposit material they had recovered from fly tipping free at recycling centres in the same way as EDDC streetscene employees? This was a Devon County Council issue.

Environmental Health & Car Parks service plan

Andrew Ennis, Service Lead Environmental Health & Car Parks reported that the Services three priorities were:

1. Corporate Health & Safety Advice
2. Food and Water Safety and security
3. Public Health & Well Being

In outlining the Service responsibilities Andrew Ennis emphasised the wide ranging activities undertaken that focused around promoting healthy individuals and communities, preventing ill health, and protecting the environment. He also explained that car parking came under his Service, with a different Portfolio Holder.

Clarification and debate covered:

- With regard to electric cars and charging points in car parks. Were hydrogen fuel cell cars now the way forward? There was still the need for the foreseeable future to support electric cars with infrastructure.

- The service was attempting to improve Community Safety and improve communities, particularly in EDDC housing properties. There was money in the budget to tackle some of the anti-social behaviour,
- Campervan and motor van users car parking in Exmouth. Maer Road had proved adequate, but the use of Imperial Road had caused conflict of other users.
- Exmouth was short of playing field provisions. Warren View was not being used due to the unstable nature of the land. The FA had funding available to improve football pitches.
- Coach car parks – how many were there and was there a consistent charging policy? The coach car parks in Exmouth and Sidmouth were successful, but there was the possibility of a pilot Seaton coach policy.
- Would electric buses be considered for East Devon? This was a DCC/ECC issue.
- Should exercise be included in the public health & well-being priority? The importance of physical activity was emphasised in the service plan.
- Some outdoor gyms, provided by S106 funding, appeared to be underused.

Countryside & Arts service plan

Charlie Plowden, Service Lead – Countryside & Arts reported that the services top three priorities were:

1. Trees
2. Maintaining our nature reserves & green spaces
3. Outdoor health & wellbeing

Other issues included the need to resource dealing with ash die back and art work using recycled plastic. There were 150,000 visitors to the nature reserves and the visitors to Seaton wetlands had increased from 40 to 60,000. There was however, still the need to identify ways to improve the offer. In addition the service had 120 volunteers who contributed 5,000 hours work each year whilst deriving health and wellbeing benefits associated with working outdoors.

Clarification and debate covered:

- Use of Seaton Wetland for social prescribing – there was a problem in obtaining money from NHS primary care to support this work.
- How had the charcoal production gone? It had been very successful this year and 650 bags had been delivered to Darts Farm for sale. They were looking to increase production for next year.
- The service was not directly involved with the reintroduction of Beavers to East Devon, which was a collaboration between Devon Wildlife Trust and Clinton Devon Estates.
- Was there likely to be a social prescribing scheme in Exmouth? There would be a Wild Exmouth scheme introduced which would look to replicate the success of the Seaton Wetlands in Exmouth along with the LED Health coaches.

Housing service plan

Megan Armstrong, Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Housing & Community reported that the services top three priorities were:

1. More affordable homes – a decent house for all
2. Homelessness & Rough Sleeping.

3. Council homes fit for purpose, tenant safety & satisfied tenants.

Amy Gilbert Jeans highlighted the Service priorities bringing them to life with examples and facts and figures on performance. She explained some of the reasons for an increase in homelessness and the greater prevalence of mental health issues, together with the impact on the Service.

Amy Gilbert Jeans also mentioned the work she was doing on poverty and how this will translate into a series of recommendations when the Council could assist local individuals and communities

Clarification and debate covered:

- Will the service be getting information on poverty across the spectrum in East Devon? Yes. Need to look at prevention work around poverty.
- Concerns about the effect of the 'Right to Buy' scheme in reducing the stock of Council Housing available in East Devon.
- Success of the Littleham project and would provide a quarterly update on progress.
- 4,500 people were on the waiting list, with 56% in need of one bedroomed accommodation.
- Need to look for more innovative solutions to the housing problem.
- There were still opportunities to develop on the limited amount of HRA land available and possible development of garage sites.
- Hope to be able to build more Council houses in the future.
- Enable/acquired 237 new affordable homes in 2018/19 working with Registered Providers.
- Problems caused by HMOs included sharing kitchens and bathrooms. It was recognised that HOs provide an important source of lower cost accommodation, but they needed to be well run and many were not.

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Update on iPads

The Chairman welcomed Laurence Whitlock, Strata IT Director to the meeting. He updated members on progress on the iPads. The brief had been given to Strata to improve the experience for East Devon iPad users. There had been a 5-6 week testing period of the new environment using selected Councillors. The challenge was to find a way around the issues reported by Councillors. It was felt that many of the problems presented had been overcome and positive feedback had been given by those Councillors in the test group. Although it was noted that Cllr Ian Thomas had reported a couple of continuing issues.

Laurence Whitlock reported that he was confident that the issues he had been asked to address was now addressed and he hoped to be able to deploy the new environment to the wider Council. He hoped to be able to work with Democratic Services to schedule migration to Councillors alongside the IT Trainer, Clive Newton.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

A Dent (Chairman)
K Bloxham
T McCollum
V Ranger
J Rowland
E Rylance
M Chapman
I Chubb
B De Saram
P Jarvis
F King
S Hawkins
V Johns
Tony Woodward
Sam Hawkins
Ian Hall

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

Megan Armstrong
Jess Bailey
Kevin Blakey
Peter Faithful
Ben Ingham
Geoff Jung
Andrew Moulding
Geoff Pook
Eileen Wragg

Officers in attendance:

Tim Child
Richard Cohen
Simon Davey
Andrew Ennis
Ed Freeman
Amy Gilbert Jeans
Henry Gordon Lennox
Andrew Hancock
Charlie Plowden
Karen Simpkins
Mark Williams
Chris Lane

Councillor apologies:

J Whibley
C Gardner
M Allen
S Chamberlain
M Hartnell
Sarah Chamberlain
Susie Bond
Marcus Hartnell
Marianne Rixson
John Loudon

Chairman

Date: