

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 16 November 2017

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00pm and ended at 8.20 pm.

***24 Public speaking**

Paul Arnott sought clarification for why the scheduled report on Elections had not come before the committee at the meeting. He stated that he had seen correspondence dated 19 September from the Electoral Commission that made clear that the District Council would not be specifically referenced in the expected report, and therefore awaiting its publication was not necessary for the committee to proceed with review of the report.

***25 Minutes**

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on the 19 October 2017 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

26 Development Management systems thinking refresh

The Service Lead, Planning Strategy and Development Management, updated the committee on work refining some of the internal procedures in dealing with planning applications. The committee had originally requested his attendance at committee in response to the concern on meeting targets for determination of planning applications. The performance monitoring report reflected a vast improvement, with the targets being met.

The systems thinking refresh had included:

- Setting up of a householder team
- Only undertaking site visits on householder applications when necessary
- Focus on pre-application
- Limiting negotiations
- Extensions of time introduced for minor approaches.

Discussion on the service changes implemented included:

- Concern that neighbours to applications do not object in order to avoid upsetting the neighbouring applicant, which could be missed if site visits were not carried out. In response, the committee were reminded that objectors could always put their views to the local Ward Member to make representation on their behalf;
- Considerable time had been saved in reducing site visits. Visits were still made if an objection was made by any objector, including Ward Member or town/parish council, and a significant proportion of applications still received a site visit. No recommendation was made on an application until officers were satisfied that they had all relevant information;
- A suggestion was made to inform the ward member and local town or parish if no site visit had been made. Whilst the Service Lead felt that this may only create demand (which was therefore preventable) he did agree to look into how feasible this would be;
- Negotiations in the past had, on some applications, become protracted. This led to many amendments to plans and a degree of consultation fatigue on those amendments. The revised approach expects submission of one pack of amendments to address issues with the application, after which a decision will be made.

The committee had also raised concern at their meeting on the 9 May on the impact of small internal room sizes, particularly in relation to converted larger buildings into home of multiple occupation. At the committee meeting of the 20 July, it was reported that Building regulations relating to internal room sizes only relate to buildings of student accommodation, hotels and schools. The only option identified at that time was the option for the committee to lobby government about their concerns.

The Service Lead reported that Government had now issued national minimum room sizes, which local authorities would have to research and evidence to support adoption through a local plan process. The national sizes came too late for the current Local Plan in place, but can be considered under the next review, which would take place once the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan (GESP) had progressed – this next review was expected to be in two years. Whilst minimum room sizes are a good concept for the welfare of house occupants, the Council needed to consider the impact of formally adopting the minimum, as it affected the size and cost of building houses. This in turn affects affordability.

The committee discussed options on lobbying in order to bring about better internal room sizes sooner, as there was great concern that domestic properties were being constructed with room sizes that were too small.

Discussion on the Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) methodology and sites coming forward for allocation included:

- Concern that the methodology adopted for assessment had no mention of assessing agricultural land – how could it be guaranteed that high grade land will be protected? There was agreement that development of high grade land should be avoided, but there had to be a balance between maintaining that land and delivering the number of houses required;
- Concern that the call for sites was not widely known and therefore a number of sites would not be put forward, as historically one councillor commented that many parish councillors were also landowners and had put forward only their own land. In response, the Service lead outlined a number of means of publicising the call for sites currently used, with the process designed to be open and transparent;
- The HELAA Panel did include developers and land agents. This was necessary as part of the process was to establish the willingness of the development industry in developing sites. Developers and land agents on the HELAA panel did not dictate or control the process. The database of sites produced formed part of the evidence to inform the GESP; the final plan would be agreed by Members through Strategic Planning Committee and Council.

Questions were also put to the Service Lead on the HELAA methodology, and how sites came forward for consideration to be assessed, and it deemed correct, added to the database of potential sites for employment and residential development.

Other discussion generally covered:

- Regular monitoring of the delivery of sites that have planning permission is made to Development Management Committee, including a delivery forecast. The next annual report on this is due in the new year;
- Issues of poor quality plans specifically for Exmouth Town Council, with slow download speeds or lack of plans attached to application for consideration. Plans were currently scanned at 300dpi as best compromise between quality and file size, and some reduction in quality was inevitable when switching between mediums of paper copy and scanning. Just over half of applications are now submitted electronically by agents, which helps sustain a high quality of plan, and work

progresses in raising his number, but legislation does not permit the Council to insist on submission electronically only. A number of examples were quoted. The Vice Chairman agreed to raise Strata related issues with the joint scrutiny committee in order to seek prompt resolution of the issues;

- The zoom option was a useful tool when viewing plans on the website for complex plans;
- Work had been undertaken on a one to one basis with each town and parish council when moving from paper provided plans to electronic, with 90% taking this on successfully when first introduced. In response to a suggestion for a training session for all town and parish clerks, the Service Lead agreed to contact the clerks to ask if they needed any specific help, and then provide one to one assistance as this was felt to be the best method;
- The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Partnerships alerted the committee to pending software updates that were required and receiving prompt attention to resolve download speed issues;
- Town and Parish Councils can always request additional time for consideration of applications, to fit around their meeting cycles if more time to review the application is required.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that the minimum standard of internal room sizes, as issued by Government, is adopted as a matter of priority by the authority.

RESOLVED that

- 1. The committee welcomes the improvement in performance against the government performance measures for the determination of planning applications;**
- 2. Strata be asked to**
 - a. Improve the link between the planning portal to the council back office systems as a priority;**
 - b. Investigate how PDF documents can be downloaded faster.**
- 3. That the planning service contacts town and parish clerks to follow up any outstanding issues with receiving electronic planning applications.**

***27 Quarterly monitoring of performance for second quarter 2017/18**

The Vice Chairman highlighted the following from the second quarter:

- Housing and Council Tax and Benefit Claims - note comments regarding peak work loads in February and again in August and September
- Affordable Homes delivered 122 LY 100 target TY. Officer comments clear;
- Beach Safety Officer resignation – carried over from old report. The Chairman expressed his disappointment at the incorrect information relating to this item, particularly as it was a key role of the committee to scrutinise performance, which must be undertaken on accurate data;
- Fly Tipping 2 instances this Qtr from 4 in Qtr 1. On target. Portfolio Holder is working with the relevant officers to work on a strategy for fly tipping, after a recent Devon Waste Board Partnership meeting;
- Cranbrook Masterplan - for consultation on Preferred Approach during November and December – covered by Strategic Planning Committee;

- GESP. Delay due to Mid Devon Local Plan examination. Draft plan before members in 2018;
- Green Space Plan - officer on maternity leave. Information board at Budleigh really interesting and informative and commended to the committee;
- Asset Mapping. Await progress with interest;
- Tree Team has now been increased. Request update in 2018 to the committee;
- District Design Guide. Delayed by workload and staffing issues;
- Streetscene Health and Safety. New Technical Officer needed. H&S to be a priority. High risk litter picking an issue, and Portfolio Holder aware of situation. Suggest support for dedicated post at draft budget meeting in January 2018;
- Releasing development sites. Officer contract ends November. In response to a question from the Chairman about a possible adverse impact on the District's 5 year housing land supply, the Service Lead for Planning Strategy and Development Management outlined a proposal being developed for replacement with a delivery team, detail of which in costing and scale would be presented in the draft budget meeting in January.

Debate covered:

- Concern on implications for tourism and leisure users of open spaces, in light of a key objective on developing events or providing booking facilities for open spaces;
- Query on the objective on the delivery of recently awarded Tesco bags for life grant award on supporting workshops and enhancing the garden – which garden?;
- Concern on overdevelopment of income streams relating to the Local Nature Reserves, and how that impacted on low income families;
- A new policy on viability was expected in the spring of 2018.

***28 Scrutiny Forward Plan**

Additional items to allocate to the forward plan were:

- Specific Portfolio Holder report on the delivery of affordable housing in the District;
- Update on the work of the Tree Team following an expansion of the team;
- Review of community engagement policy from other authorities.

Cllr Gardner also raised a number of specific questions in relation to the proofing of ballot papers, and maintaining secrecy of ballot, that she wished to have responses to when the committee received the Elections report now set for February 2018. Advice was given to provide the questions in detail and the Democratic Services officer would circulate these to the committee, and ask the Chief Executive to cover the questions in his updated report. Cllr Rylance also requested an update on the implementation of recommendations made by the Electoral Commission following the 2015 election.

County Councillors for the district would be requested to lobby the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health Services to attend a future committee meeting to discuss mental health services in the area.

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

Scrutiny Members present:

Cathy Gardner
Dean Barrow
Cherry Nicholas
Maddy Chapman

Roger Giles
Alan Dent
Bill Nash
Marianne Rixson
Eleanor Rylance
Douglas Hull

Other Members

Phil Twiss
Brian Bailey
Pauline Stott
Peter Faithfull
Rob Longhurst
David Barratt

Officers present:

Ed Freeman, Service Lead Planning Strategy and Development Management
Shirley Shaw, Planning Barrister
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Apologies from Scrutiny Members:

Bruce de Saram
Simon Grundy
John O’Leary
Darryl Nicholas
Val Ranger

Apologies from Non – Scrutiny Members:

Jill Elson
Tom Wright
Paul Diviani
Mike Howe

Chairman Date.....