

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at Online via the Zoom App on 14 January 2021

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.03 am and ended at 1.11 pm

115 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

116 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were noted at the previous session on 13 January 2021.

117 Declarations of interest

Cllr A Colman; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor
Cllr O Davey; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor
Cllr V Johns; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Ottery St Mary Town Councillor
Cllr E Rylance; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Broadclyst Parish Councillor; in receipt of business support grant
Cllr K Blakey; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Cranbrook Town Councillor
Cllr B De Saram; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor
Cllr I Hall; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Devon County Councillor
Cllr N Hookway; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Queens Drive Delivery Group member
Cllr T Woodward; Minute 120 and 121; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor

118 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

119 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential items.

120 Key Service Plan Objectives 2021- 22

The joint committees considered individual key service plan objectives as set out in these minutes for the following services:

- Finance
- Governance and Licensing
- Place, Assets and Commercialisation
- Organisational Development
- Growth, Development and Prosperity
- Planning

(a) Finance

The Strategic Lead for Finance, and the Service Lead Revenue and Benefits, provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22.

For the Finance team, work for the coming year would include:

- Continued monitoring updates to Cabinet;
- Working with services on ensuring financial procedures were in place for the significant level of homeworking, with work already undertaken on additional controls and processes for items such as invoices;
- Support to services on dealing with business rate processes;
- Improvements to procurement guidance
- 2022/23 MTFP considerations;
- Accessible financial monitoring reports, such as dashboards.

In specific reference to Revenues and Benefits, work in the past few months included:

- Multiple schemes to administer to support business, work which was expected to be ongoing for some time;
- Deploying 100% rate relief for the hospitality and leisure industry in the area;
- Operating the test and trace payment scheme, including the development of the discretionary element of the scheme. The Council had been the lead in developing policy for the Devon area;
- Covid Council Tax Hardship scheme delivery;
- Increased demand for Council Tax Reduction Scheme;
- Handling applications for the Covid Hardship Scheme;
- The Community Hub being staffed by the existing Customer Services Team.

The element of the service plan for Revenue and Benefits included:

- Covid measures, including the review of schemes;
- Rebuilding collection levels;
- Poverty agenda, including the Poverty Dashboard development;
- Business rating database development;
- Continuing to refine the online service to increase efficiency;
- Income maximisation (fraud and compliance).

Clarification and responses included:

- Commendation of the hard work and dedication of the team to react to the changing offer of multiple support schemes provided by the Government for both individuals and businesses, including the rapid reform of how applications can be made to reduce the burden for the applicant and make such funding more accessible;
- Whilst there continued to be development in online transactions to help efficiency, the service recognised the importance of lines of communication with people less able to access services online, and kept measures in place for telephone and (where possible) face to face contact;
- The Revenue and Benefits team had operated for some time as an agile team to adapt to meet demand where pinch points occurred in the work; the team were monitored closely by manager to help maintain their wellbeing;

- The financial resilience post was funded by Devon County Council; third party organisations (such as charities) support discussion would be part of the remit of the Poverty Panel in the coming months.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Finance Service be adopted.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Finance Service be adopted.

(b) Governance & Licensing

The Strategic Lead for Governance and Licensing provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. He outlined his pride in his team in the significant achievements delivered in the past few months, including:

- Reactional elements by the Legal and Licensing teams;
- Delivery of virtual meetings, as recently reported to Cabinet with the request for additional staff resource;
- Support on taxi licensing with an emergency licensing policy.

The service plan for the coming year included:

- Revising the Cemetery Regulations;
- Review of Taxi Policy;
- Review of approach to Council meetings;
- Implementation of any decision by Council following the outcomes of the Governance Review Working Party.

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery gave thanks to the Strategic Lead for his work over the past few months, describing his fantastic contribution across a number of services. She also commended his work and that of his team in enabling the Council to continue its work by facilitating virtual meetings.

Clarification and responses included:

- Current legislation still required Council meetings to be held in person once the temporary rules expired in May. A watching brief was being kept on Teignbridge District Council's implementation of hybrid meetings, that was still in the early stages of delivery. The LGA were lobbying Government for the legislative issue to be resolved, in order to permit the ability to deliver meetings online in the future. Many members commented that they would prefer to have the option of physical, hybrid or full virtual meetings in the future, to give more choice for attendance and reduce travel.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Governance and Licensing Service be adopted.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Governance and Licensing Service be adopted.

(c) Place, Assets and Commercialisation

The Service Lead for Place, Assets and Commercialisation provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. He outlined his pride in the newly formed team, who had risen to the challenges brought in recent months. Recent work had included:

- Support to tenants, such as rent deferrals and general advice on grants and similar;
- Covid secure measures at Blackdown House, Exmouth Town Hall and other buildings for the safety of staff;
- Honiton swimming pool refurbishment planning;
- Stock condition survey continued from the previous year, now concluded;
- Reopening High Street Safely Fund;
- Progress on Queens Drive through the Delivery Group.

For the coming year, the service plan had a focus on:

- Team Devon economy recovery work, including funding opportunities;
- Using asset base to drive economic growth;
- Continued work on carbon reduction;
- Supporting the HRA and Housing TaFF in regard to the growth of housing stock;
- New asset management plan;
- Access to asset data for councillors to help inform decision making.

Clarification and responses included:

- Work was underway through the Asset Management Forum on the asset transfer policy, in that consultation with Town and Parish Councils on the procedure for transfer was due to start shortly. Work on assessment of the assets would give a clear indication of what assets could be available for transfer and would help give a clear priority list, and resources would be considered against that – clearly there was not sufficient resource to handle requests from all towns and parishes at one time;
- The importance of small business units, as many Members felt there would be an increased demand for them as the workforce changes in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Place, Assets and Commercialisation Service be adopted.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Place, Assets and Commercialisation Service be adopted.

(d) Organisational Development, Transformation and Equalities

The Chief Executive provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22.

Achievements of the service highlighted included:

- Staff welfare measures, including calls to vulnerable and shielding staff;
- IIP Platinum level award;
- Introduction of mental health first aiders for both Council staff and Strata staff.

Objectives in the coming year included:

- Focus on engagement with the public;
- Revisiting participating budgeting
- Website development
- Providing regular advice to managers and others

Clarification and responses included:

- Discussion on measures for supporting staff can be raised and scoped with the Scrutiny committee if required;
- A watching brief is kept on unitary progress at Somerset, but it was not felt appropriate to put in preparatory work in the current service plan as the prospect of development of unitary status was unlikely in the current year;
- The Transformation fund would be utilised for the work on developing the new Council plan, following the adoption of the Statement of Intent.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Organisational Development Service be adopted.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Organisational Development Service be adopted.

(e) Growth, Development and Prosperity

The Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. The service team had been formed a year ago, and the elements that the service covered were explained to the Committees.

Achievements during the past year included:

- Adapting to new ways of delivery during lockdown, and working across teams to include assistance on items such as business grants and redundancy recovery;
- Increased pressure on use of green space assets.

The service plan before the Committees included:

- Moving from responsive to proactive economic recovery, and helping to realise a more resilient economic recovery overall;
- Projects to deliver large scale carbon savings;
- Adapting to post Brexit, such as changes to funding streams.

Clarification and responses included:

- Welcomed reference to skills, as many residents would be facing the need to re-skill to open up employment opportunities;
- Adapting delivery to meet the evidence of impact on groups; evidence suggested a disproportionate impact on specific sectors of business, age groups and geographical areas, that needs to be taken into account; hence the additional staff set out in the draft budget to develop the approach to tackling those areas;
- There is an existing adapt and thrive support program; as well as a number of resources available to business both at County level and nationally;

- Awareness of increased impact on rural communities, because of the disadvantages of less travel links and some areas of poor broadband, as well as changes to farming subsidies. Reference to rural communities in the service plan was welcomed;

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Growth, Development and Prosperity Service be adopted.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Growth, Development and Prosperity Service be adopted.

(f) Planning

The Service Lead for Planning provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. He highlighted significant changes in working methods undertaken this year in order for the service to continue to function during lockdown, including the change from a paper heavy process to paperless overnight. Despite the pandemic, planning application numbers had increased, and there was a significant increase for the Land Charges team following the changes to stamp duty.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning gave this thanks to the Service Lead and his team for their work in difficult circumstances. He felt that the service plan presented to the Committees struck the right balance for the year ahead. He also thanked Councillor Susie Bond for her briefing to him when he took on the role of Portfolio Holder.

Looking forward to the service plan for the coming year, key areas of work included:

- the new Local Plan, with the start of the consultation process beginning the following week;
- Addressing climate change;
- Coastal erosion and flooding;
- Implications of new Environment Act;
- Diversity of types of housing;
- Supporting economic recovery;
- Audit recommendations on CIL and section 106.

Clarification and responses included:

- Preparatory work underway for the new Environmental Act, but the detail still unknown; the Ecologist post would cut across several services, including Planning;
- Acknowledgement of the risk to the local plan when planning legislation changes but there was no response to the White Paper as yet; therefore it was deemed more of a risk to delay the local plan to wait for those changes. Strategic Planning Committee would monitor any updates on the proposed changes to the legislation
- Issues and Options consultation and the call for sites were undertaken simultaneously for efficiency;

- Amend the service plan to make a clear distinction between the delivery of affordable housing, and social housing, particularly due to the Council's appetite to prioritise on social housing delivery;
- Review on the urban extension for Axminster had been delayed and it was hoped this would come before the Strategic Planning Committee in the spring.
- Landscaping conditions could only be imposed by the Council up to five years; Tree preservation orders and conservation areas gave longer protection, but legislation limits what the Council can take action on in relation to landscaping areas in developments.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Planning Service be adopted, subject to:

- a) Reference to both social and affordable housing;
- b) Inclusion of the recommendations from the audit on CIL and section 106.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Planning Service be adopted, subject to:

- a) Reference to both social and affordable housing;
- b) Inclusion of the recommendations from the audit on CIL and section 106

121 **Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets 2021-22**

The committees had agreed a provisional recommendation to Cabinet, subject to discussion on the service plans taking place.

At the conclusion of the debate of the service plans, as no substantive changes had been recommended that required an amendment to the draft Revenue or Capital budget presented, the committees recommended as follows:

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Draft Revenue Budget 2021/22 be adopted;

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Draft Capital Budget 2021/22 be adopted.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

C Brown (Chair)
N Hookway (Vice-Chair)
M Chapman
A Colman
O Davey
S Hawkins
V Johns
F King

T McCollum
H Parr
V Ranger (Vice-Chairman)
E Rylance
B Taylor
M Allen
K Blakey
S Bond
B De Saram
I Hall
M Hartnell
T Woodward

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
J Bailey
D Ledger
P Hayward
S Jackson
G Jung
A Dent
P Faithfull
M Rixson
A Moulding
S Chamberlain
E Wragg

Officers in attendance:

Mark Williams, Chief Executive
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead Governance and Licensing
Tim Child, Service Lead - Place, Assets & Commercialisation
Ed Freeman, Service Lead Planning Strategy and Development Management
Andrew Wood, Service Lead - Growth Development and Prosperity
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor apologies:

C Wright
S Gazzard

Chairman

Date: