

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 2 March 2023

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.04 pm

100 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

101 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 2 February 2023 were agreed and signed as a true record.

102 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

103 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

104 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential / exempt items.

105 Decisions made by Cabinet called in by Members for scrutiny in accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules

There were no decisions made by Cabinet called in by Members for scrutiny.

106 Portfolio Holder Annual Report - Coast, Country and Environment

Cllr Geoff Jung, Portfolio Holder for Coast, Country and Environment presented his report and thanked the Countryside Team for their Annual Review, which had been circulated to all Councillors. Questions and comments on the Portfolio Holder report included the following points:

- Issues with staffing were starting to improve following the recent pay review.
- A recent waste survey had shown that elderly households are most likely to recycle, with busy families the least likely. Food waste continues to be a big issue, although a Devon wide survey showed that EDDC has a higher rate of food waste collection than other authorities.
- It was noted that each service within the portfolio now has a workforce plan which includes succession planning.
- Recycling of waste in public areas is mixed due to improper use by members of the public, resulting in most waste going to the Exeter incinerator.
- There was discussion regarding types of flaps on recycling vehicles and it was noted that this is also a health and safety issue for operatives as well as a practical matter.

- The lower Otter Estuary project is now being seen in a positive light, despite initial opposition, and is viewed as a good example of collaborative working across various organisations.
- There was discussion regarding on-going concerns about beach pollution in Exmouth and continuing incidences of sewage discharges as a result of storm overflow. It was noted that South West Water sewage treatment plants are at capacity. SWW are trying to resolve issues at the Maer nature reserve which is managed by the Countryside team.
- It was noted that the fitting of meters to storm overflow pipes is likely to give rise to more pollution alerts as information will be in real time and will result in more beach closures.
- It was further noted that the new draft Local Plan included a new sewage treatment plant connected to the proposed new town, which could be viewed as preferable to additional housing in locations across the district with no new sewage treatment capacity.
- Regarding the energy from waste incinerator, it was noted that constant air sampling is undertaken and that the operation is both efficient and clean.
- Pest control in Council properties should be carried out immediately in order to avoid increasing problems.

The Director of Housing, Health and Environment advised the Committee that the Environmental Health team is aware of pollution incidents across the district and continues to hold South West Water to account. The service plan includes a more proactive approach to enforcement.

The Committee thanked Cllr Jung for his report and for attending the meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

1. That the Council encourages South West Water to bring the new sewage treatment plants and other infrastructure improvements into operation as soon as possible for the benefit of residents and that the Council takes proactive action wherever possible to protect its residents from the effects of pollution.
2. That the Council works with other authorities in the south west and involves the relevant MPs in support of its dialogue with South West Water to achieve improvements.
3. That the Council, through its partners, ensures that food waste is reduced and recycled and that, if necessary, a campaign is introduced after the next election to educate and encourage residents.

The Committee agreed to request a report from MPs setting out their actions on requiring improvements from South West Water and that this be put on the Forward Plan for the new Committee following the election.

107 Expenditure on consultants and agency staff 2021 - 2022

The Finance Manager and Deputy S.151 Officer presented the report on expenditure on consultants and agency staff 2021-22 and advised that the detail in the report had been generated from the Council's financial systems, with commentary provided by budget managers.

Cllr Kim Bloxham had submitted questions on the report prior to the meeting and a response had been circulated to all Councillors. Cllr Bloxham had further questions on the report and the Finance Manager agreed to provide a response following the meeting. Additional information regarding consultancy projects which had not been completed would be added to future reports.

It was suggested that a review of the value of engaging consultants as against direct employment or short term contracts in certain areas of work could be added to the Scrutiny Forward Plan.

Discussion and questions on the report included the following points:

- Consultants are recruited where specialist expertise for certain projects is required in the short term, rather than being a full time post.
- The Legal team requires high level advice from time to time and is also currently experiencing difficulty with recruitment.
- The external audit report includes the issue of value for money in this regard.

The Finance Manager agreed to provide a summary of previous reports to show year on year comparisons of costs.

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET

That where the Council has to employ consultants it always aims to achieve best value for money.

108 **Quarterly performance report - quarter 3**

The quarterly performance report was taken as read.

Concern was expressed with regard to the turnaround of void properties. The Director of Housing, Health and Environment advised that issues with void properties had arisen due to contractor capacity, more voids than usual, a backlog of repairs following the pandemic and the number of properties being returned to the Council in an appalling state. It was noted that the Housing Review Board is monitoring the situation closely and that the Housing service plan is focussed on this issue.

Questions and discussion on the quarterly performance report included the following:

- With regard to housing benefit claims, it was noted that the team has a significant workload due to the delivery of various Government schemes and emergency help which is on-going, often with complex cases.
- There is a need for a good stock of emergency accommodation.

The Director of Housing, Health and Environment advised that the need for temporary accommodation has increased dramatically in recent years and that the Council's own stock is sometimes used for temporary housing as well as private lets using rent deposits, and property acquisitions to increase the housing stock. The Housing Task Force is working to bring forward schemes to boost the supply of affordable housing.

The Housing Review Board can bring in additional contractors to help when required. More frequent inspections of properties and pre-termination visits can be effective with regard to improving the state of void properties.

The Committee noted that Councillors should be encouraged to participate with officers in estate inspections in their wards as these prove to be very useful.

It was also noted that the Portfolio Holder Sustainable Homes and Communities is proactively involved with the various strategies to engage Council tenants on their

estates. There is a planned programme of estate walk-about covering all areas of the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO HOUSING REVIEW BOARD

1. That the Council continues to encourage tenants to return properties in a good state of repair and condition.
2. That improved monitoring of void properties is undertaken when they are due to be returned to the Council for re-letting.
3. That Councillors be encouraged to accompany officers on property and estate inspections in their wards.

109 **Forward Plan**

Discussion on the Forward Plan included the following points:

- The new County wide Tree Policy will include many of the points raised in the recommendations made previously by the Scrutiny Tree TaFF. The Tree Policy, developed with various partner agencies, is due to be presented to the Strategic Planning Committee in June and will include a mix of protective measures and increasing the County's tree stock.
- The report of the Scrutiny Tree TaFF from 2015 would be circulated following the meeting.

Following discussion, it was agreed to remove the review of recommendations of the Tree TaFF from the Forward Plan.

The following changes to the Forward Plan were also agreed:

- To leave the proposal from Mid Devon District Council for a joint review into planning controls and regulatory requirements associated with the bio-energy industry within Devon to the next Council year following the elections.
- To add the review of the value of consultants against direct employment or short term contracts in certain areas of work to the Forward Plan.
- To delete the consideration of the use and provision of all forms of renewable energy across the whole district from the Forward Plan.

With the above amendments, the Forward Plan was agreed.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

A Bruce
M Chapman
O Davey (Vice-Chair)
B De Saram (Chair)
D Key
H Parr
B Taylor

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
K Bloxham
G Jung

M Rixson
J Rowland
T Wright

Officers in attendance:

John Golding, Director of Housing, Health and Environment
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
John Symes, Finance Manager
Anita Williams, Interim Director of Governance and Licensing and Monitoring Officer

Councillor apologies:

J Bailey
S Hawkins
E Rylance
J Whibley
T Woodward

Chair

Date: