

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the joint meeting of Scrutiny Committee and Overview Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 10 December 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 5.32 pm and ended at 7.46 pm

29 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 January 2024

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record.

30 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

31 Public speaking

No members of the public had registered to speak at the meeting.

32 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

33 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential/exempt items.

34 Key Directorate Plan Objectives 2025-2026

The Chief Executive introduced this item and advised that the Directorate Plans had been aligned directly to the Council Plan, as agreed by all Members, and which covers the next four years. Directorate Plans 2024 - 2028 included the service level objectives which set out how the objectives within the Directorate would be delivered during the period April 2025 – March 2026.

The Director of Finance advised that the Directorate Plans and the draft budget align currently, so that the funding available aligns with the Directorate Plans which are before the Committees for consideration. Any changes recommended by the Committees would require a corresponding change to the draft budget.

35 Housing and Health

The Director of Housing and Health presented the Housing and Health Directorate Plan 2024 – 28. The plan provided a high-level overview of the services across the Directorate. Key to the delivery of the plan was on-going communication and working with other Directorates. The Plan had been produced using a person centred, trauma informed perspective.

The Assistant Director Environmental Health introduced the services delivered by Environmental Health and how they support delivery of the Council Plan.

The Assistant Director Housing Regulated Services introduced the areas of delivery covered by this service. As with the Environmental Health service, a person centred, trauma informed approach provided a golden thread running through service delivery.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- Regarding communications software, the new corporate performance management system would improve communications. Work was also on-going to ensure that the right people are involved at the right time to ensure good cross-service communications.
- With regard to the suggested demolition of unused district-wide garages which are in disrepair to provide sites for affordable homes, it was noted that this is part of a larger piece of work across the Directorate. The feasibility and affordability of this suggestion would have to be considered as part of the wider long-term asset management strategy and set alongside other priorities. This work cannot be done in isolation and would take time.
- Manual systems and checks are in place to enable Home Safeguard to support vulnerable people. It was proposed to hold a workshop to explain the detail of how Home Safeguard works, and this could also cover how the system operates in the event of a power failure.
- A workshop could be arranged to enable Members to better understand how the Devon Home Choice application system works.
- It was noted that there needs to be sufficient flexibility within the four year Directorate Plan to take account of the impact of uncertainties in the wider world. There is a need to work in an agile and responsive way which includes horizon scanning. The Directorate Plan is a living document which will respond to both operational needs and longer-term external influences.
- With regard to the four year budget required to deliver the Directorate Plan, the Medium Term Financial Plan looks ten years ahead, however, it was acknowledged that there is uncertainty in the wider public finance and plans would have to react to any future changes in local government finance.
- Work is on-going to set appropriate performance targets [Section 3 of the Directorate Plan]. With regards to the Environmental Health service, some of the work is business as usual so that targets would not be appropriate. The formal document containing agreed performance targets would be signed-off in the new year.
- Quarterly performance would be reported to the Housing Review Board going forward.

The Chair thanked the Director of Housing and Health and her team for attending the meeting and for the comprehensive and excellent Directorate Plan.

36 **Place**

The Director of Place presented the Place Directorate Plan 2024 – 2028. Formed relatively recently, the Directorate brings together four key service areas which work together to deliver the Council Plan. The Director highlighted key areas for service delivery moving forward.

The Assistant Director Countryside & Leisure introduced key areas of work for the ecology, trees and countryside teams and emphasised the need for partnership working with other organisations. The Assistant Director also highlighted key priorities for culture service delivery.

The Assistant Director Planning & Development Management introduced key projects including developing a talent management strategy and greater engagement with town and parish councils. Delivery of services and infrastructure at Cranbrook remained a priority.

The Assistant Director Place & Assets outlined key priorities for the service area: establishing an assertive delivery model for the second new town; placemaking for towns; developing and implementing a new asset management plan.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following:

- Concern was expressed regarding the effectiveness of planning enforcement. Scrutiny of this area would be discussed to determine the most appropriate way of addressing the concerns. The review of systems and processes of planning enforcement was included in the service plan for the coming year.
- Delivery of the Tourism Strategy continues to be a key piece of work for the service.
- A rolling programme of replacement and renewal of children's play parks is included in the investment plan for the year.
- Concern was expressed regarding the additional capacity requirements for the District Heating Network. It was noted that the District Heating Stakeholder Forum had been established previously to address such concerns. The project design had allowed for scaling up of capacity to deal with future expansion and development.
- Concerns regarding the safeguarding of ancient woodland would be addressed by the Strategic Planning Committee as part of its consideration of the new Local Plan.
- The Regulation 19 version of the new Local Plan has to include the Master Plan for the proposed new community and it was confirmed that the timeframe for the Master Plan, as stated in the Directorate Plan, would be met.
- Concern was expressed regarding the need for a step change in provision of planning enforcement, particularly given the proposed development of the second new town. It was noted that a step change would only be achieved through increasing staff capacity, which may not be a realistic option, however, the planned review of enforcement systems and processes would provide a good starting point in delivering a better service.
- Regarding potential changes to local government structures, it was noted that there is a high level of complexity and ambiguity currently. It was hoped that the imminent devolution white paper would provide some clarity. It was crucial for the Council to work collaboratively with its peers and partners going forward.
- With regard to the delivery of the proposed second new community, it was noted that the delivery plan would be bold, having learnt lessons from the delivery of Cranbrook.

The Chair thanked the Director and his team for attending and for their excellent and comprehensive Directorate Plan.

37 **Finance**

The Portfolio Holder for Finance presented the Directorate Plan 2024 – 2028. The key objective for the Directorate is to get the basics right to enable delivery of the Council Plan. The Portfolio Holder highlighted the anti-poverty work and council tax collection rates as examples where the Council is a leading local authority.

The Director of Finance noted that the Customer Charter is a key piece of work led by the Assistant Director Revenues, Benefits & Customer Services. Work is also on-going to deliver the Fraud Strategy and to set a balanced budget for 2025 – 26. Members would be kept informed and involved as further Government changes are announced. Concern was noted regarding issues around auditing and audit opinion on the Council's accounts.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- Council tax charges for second home ownership have now been included in the Council tax base. The tax base has now been notified to town and parish councils.

- The over-complicated nature of local council accounts is recognised as a national risk with a very small number of companies qualified to undertake audits. There is a need to change the way local authority accounts are produced rather than just draw a line and start again which could result in another backlog in the future.
- With regard to increases in fees charged by the Council, a fees and charges schedule is being produced to accompany the draft budget. There will be areas where the Council can maximise revenue to support service delivery.
- Where an owner has multiple properties which are rented out, these would fall under business rates rather than second home ownership. The Council has systems in place to detect fraud and substantiate home ownership to identify second home owners liable for Council tax.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder and Director of Finance for the Directorate Plan.

38 **Governance**

The Director of Governance presented the Governance Directorate Report 2024 – 2028. Key areas of work include a review of the Constitution, development of the People Strategy, embedding the new corporate performance and risk system, reviewing leadership and management development, roll-out of Sharepoint, County Council elections, Community Governance Review for Cranbrook and improved engagement with town and parish councils.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- Regarding the Community Governance Review for Cranbrook, which also affects neighbouring parishes, concern was expressed that the April 2026 target date is too late and should be brought forward. The Director for Governance recognised the importance of the Review and advised that certain legal changes can only take effect in April of any year. The Review would be conducted as soon as possible although some changes can only come into effect in April 2026 at the earliest.
- There was concern that positive messages are not being communicated sufficiently to residents.
- Regarding training for town and parish councillors following an election, there should be a balance between training provided by the Devon Association of Local Councils as the primary provider, and supplementary training provided by EDDC in a supporting role.
- It was noted that new laptops which do not use the global desktop are currently being trialled.

The Leader of the Council wished to record his thanks to the Housing Directorate for the work they are undertaking to improve the Council's housing stock and service. Historic difficulties within the service have already been acknowledged and there is a need to clearly communicate with residents where improvements are now being made.

The Chair wished to record his thanks to the Management Information Officer for her hard work in compiling the Directorate Plans and in making improvements in the reporting of performance information.

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET:

That Cabinet approves the Directorate Plans for 2024 – 2028 for the Housing and Health, Place, Finance and Governance Directorates.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

I Barlow
K Bloxham
J Brown
M Chapman
M Goodman (Chair)
A Hall (Vice-Chair)
M Hall
J Heath
V Johns
Y Levine
D Mackinder
A Bailey
B Bailey
K Blakey
P Fernley
M Martin
D Wilson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
C Brown
R Collins
S Hawkins
N Hookway
B Ingham
D Ledger
J Loudoun
T Olive
M Rixson

Officers in attendance:

Jo Avery, Management Information Officer
Matthew Blythe, Assistant Director Environmental Health
Tim Child, Assistant Director Place, Assets & Commercialisation
Simon Davey, Director of Finance
Ed Freeman, Assistant Director Planning Strategy and Development Management
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Assistant Director Housing (Tenancy Services)
Tracy Hendren, Chief Executive
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Andrew King, Interim Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services)
Charles Plowden, Assistant Director Countryside and Leisure
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Melanie Wellman, Director of Governance (Monitoring Officer)
Andrew Wood, Director of Place
Naomi Harnett, Corporate Lead (Interim) – Major Projects & Programmes

Councillor apologies:

O Davey
A Toye
J Whibley

Chair

Date: