

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees held on 13 January 2021

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 2.11 pm

108 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

109 Minutes of the previous meeting

The notes of the previous joint committees were noted.

110 Declarations of interest

Cllr B De Saram; Minutes 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor
Cllr N Hookway; Minute 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Queens Drive Delivery Group Member

Cllr V Johns: Minute 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Ottery St Mary Town Councillor

Cllr M Chapman: Minute 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor

Cllr O Davey: Minute 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor

Cllr Tony McCullom: Minute 114b and 114c: Personal Interest: Works for Honiton Town Council. Where he is employed to run car parks, and Chair of Housing Review Board

Cllr E Rylance: Minute 113 and 114: Personal Interest: Broadclyst Parish Councillor

Cllr A Colman: Minute 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor

Cllr S Gazzard; Minute 114c; Personal Interest: Tenant of the Council; Minute 113 and 114; Personal Interest: Exmouth Town Councillor

Cllr A Moulding; Minute 114a; Personal Interest: President of Cloakham Lawns Association

Cllr I Hall; Minute 114a; Personal Interest: Chairman of Cloakham Lawns Association and Devon County Councillor

111 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

112 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential items.

113 Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets 2021-22

The Chairman welcomed the Strategic Lead Finance to present an overview of the budget position and the basis for the Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets.

In presenting the budgets, the Strategic Lead Finance highlighted to the committees:

- Changes to the local government funding formula and the business rate retention scheme are now assumed to take place in 2022/23 due to the pandemic, but this has not yet been confirmed;

- Preparatory work in developing savings and additional income to bridge the projected deficit of £0.7m (from external factors of pay award, effect of inflation, and additional cost pressures due predominantly to homelessness, recycling and refuse staff costs, decrease in recyclable income, local plan costs) has been considered and agreed by the Budget Setting and Capital Allocations Panel, endorsed by Cabinet. The updated proposals, assuming agreement, would then provide a balanced budget without the need to reduce the level of service provided by the Council;
- The draft budget includes key areas from the Council's new Statement of Intent: Carbon reduction measures; addressing poverty; additional social housing;
- It also accommodates additional resources to address specific staffing requirements, with external funding being sought where possible;
- The draft budget assumes an increase in Council Tax by £5 a year;
- The budget balance is maintained, but with the balance at the bottom of the adopted range for the General Fund Balance.

The risks for the year ahead, which may require funding and so would fall to the General Fund Balance included:

- Implications of Covid-19 – expected loss of income or costs associated with the impact of the pandemic are considered at this stage to be mitigated with the funding provided by Government;
- Car Park Income – the budget assumes an additional income of £300k from car park revenue through the increase in parking charges. If Council decides to delay that increase, then that shortfall could be met from Balances or alternative funding for part of or up to a year; if the decision is not to increase charges at all, the risk is a considerable impact on further budget setting and more difficult than the position outlined in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP);
- LED – The agreed subsidy of up to £1.3m is hoped will be partially met by Government funding, as is the case with in-house leisure services. The newly formed LED Monitoring Forum have considered initial indications from LED of their required increase in the Service Level payment, in order to maintain existing services going forward, but the rising cost is something that the Council cannot afford. Further work by the Forum, along with appointment of independent expert advice, will provide recommended outcomes back to Cabinet and Council;
- New proposals for the Queens Drive Open Space to be concluded and costed;
- Actions from the Poverty Panel;
- Management Review;
- Brexit – effect on the Council's main contractors.

The settlement from Government includes a new grant – Lower Tier Service Grant Allocation (LTSG). This is a one-off grant to help with services impacted, with the Council's allocation as £700k. This sum is proposed to mitigate the risk of costs arising as set out above, and other currently unknown pressures during 2021/22.

The Housing Revenue Account would be debated for recommendation by the Housing Review Board.

The Capital Programme has been considered by the Budget Setting and Capital Allocation Panel (BSCAP), including the approval by Cabinet of capital projects put forward for 2021/22 that have met the set criteria and matched in priority against the funding available.

Recommendations would go forward to Cabinet before referral to Council to agree the final budget.

The joint Committees were being asked to:

- Recommend the Draft Revenue Budget 2021/22 for adoption;
- Recommend the Draft Capital Budget 2021/22 for adoption;
- Recommend the Key Service Plan objectives 2021/22 for adoption.

The Portfolio Holder Finance commented on the magnificent achievement of the Strategic Lead Finance and his team in the prudent actions taken to bring forward a balanced budget without reducing service level, in an unprecedented time.

Questions, comments and clarification included:

- Member comment on delaying the car park fee rise in order to assist the economy, impacted by the pandemic; reference was made to the Car Parking Task and Finish Forum, in that some Members felt there was additional work to be completed by that Forum and therefore no recommendation which included an increase in parking charges should go forward. Other Members supported the increase, as they felt it was modest and made a considerable impact on the balanced budget;
- Successful bid for section 106 funding for a capital project meant that money returned to the Capital Fund and therefore could other projects now receive funding? In response, Members were reminded of the set criteria and prioritisation process that the BSCAP worked through; projects could be considered throughout the year, but through this formal process;
- Could the LTSG be used to assist ailing private leisure clubs, if it could be used to support LED? In response, Members had to decide how best to use that grant against the risk costs for the Council as presented; it was more appropriate to private clubs to apply for concessionary grants from Government;
- Confirmation that the Homelessness Strategy is included in the draft budget, and that the data analyst post detailed in the report was an in-house resource to work on the mentioned "Poverty dashboard";
- Additional post need for the Recycling and Waste Team was explained in detail to the Committees;
- Savings identified in the budget relating to toilets predominantly covered the Business Rate Relief, which was announced in 2020. Cabinet would receive future reports on the toilet review, and Members were reminded of the enhanced cleaning schedule now in place for those public toilets that remained open.

A provisional recommendation to Cabinet by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees was made at this point to:

- Recommend the Draft Revenue Budget 2021/22 for adoption;
- Recommend the Draft Capital Budget 2021/22 for adoption.

The Chair advised that this would be revisited after the two committees had reviewed the Service Plans in both this meeting and the following session on 14 January 2021.

114 **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: Countryside and Leisure; Environmental Health and Car Parks; Housing; and Streetscene.

(a) Countryside & Leisure

The Service Lead for Countryside and Leisure provided clarification and responded to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. He highlighted the increase in value of the nature reserves of the Council as a wellbeing resource for the public; and the commitment to moving the educational element of the service online. Events had been re-imagined to meet social distancing requirements and had proved popular.

The service were also preparing for the implications of the new Environment Act and the new duties that would come with it; although existing work by the team was already in line with the Act requirements.

The Portfolio Holder for Coast, Country and Environment praised the fantastic work of the Countryside team, who had re-invented so many elements of the service as a result of the pandemic. He felt that future “Stay-cations” would bring added pressure to the service and therefore welcomed the inclusion of an ecologist post to the Council.

Clarification and responses included:

- Assurance that changes to the Seaton Wetlands, including car park surfacing, pay points and refreshment facilities, would help deliver a better facility to meet the demand by users of the wetlands, but delivered with care to minimise any impact on the natural environment of the wetlands. The improvements would not only enhance the site, but would help bring in revenue; donations had decreased dramatically. Work will continue with ward members as changes are implemented. The Portfolio Holder Finance, who had overseen the debate on the capital project bid for wetlands enhancements, also sought to reassure that the set criteria had been met;
- Villages in Action committed to continue and will report outcomes of progress to next Arts and Culture Forum on how it can continue to operate within the social distancing rules;
- The LED Monitoring Forum had oversight of the development of a new Leisure Strategy.

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

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

(b) Environmental Health and Car Parks

The Service Lead for Environmental Health and Car Parks provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. In presenting the service plan, he highlighted:

- Continued volume of work of the service;
- New work as a direct consequence of the pandemic, such as the wellbeing of the clinically extremely vulnerable in the District, the Council’s own staff wellbeing, and working with the NHS and Devon County Council on testing options and the vaccination programme;
- Fewer routine hygiene inspections, but a shift to assisting businesses to change their offer – for example, switching to a takeaway service in a safe and secure manner;

- 50% rise in neighbour complaints;
- Preparatory work on the climate emergency action plan;
- Poverty panel continued;
- The Car Park Task and Finish Forum would continue in forthcoming weeks, including consideration of a revised local parking permit for residents, and reviewing revenue from campervans.

The Portfolio Holder for Coast, Countryside and Environment gave his thanks to the team for their efforts during a difficult year, and was considering how their approach to dealing with the increase of anti-social behaviour could be reviewed to help the team cope.

Clarification and responses included:

- In working towards reducing the carbon footprint of the Council, virtual council meetings should continue;
- Additional staff resource had been put back into the Environmental Health team, within the existing budget, for the nuisance complaint workload;
- In response to a query on Council staff mental health, Members were informed of the safeguards in place, including frequent contact between managers and staff, and counselling availability;
- In response to concern about safety near electric fleet vehicles, Members were informed that the current electric vehicles in the fleet had a workaround for producing a noise to alert pedestrians; and that future leased vehicles would include an in-built tone for this purpose;
- In response to a query about the Maer Car Park, it was not envisaged as coming forward as a vaccination site, but may come online as an additional testing site. If that happens, there will be a lost revenue claim for compensation to the NHS, but it is likely that only part of the area will be used and therefore the impact on revenue may not be severe;
- There was no entitlement of the Council to receive car registration information from the DVLA to pass onto the police in respect of suspected visitors breaching the current lockdown rules;
- Local Action Groups continued to provide valuable work were possible, but due to the pandemic their momentum has lessened;
- Member appreciation of all the volunteer groups at the current time;
- Paying for car parking was changing, in that the paying by phone provider was now operational across the region, and the additional fee for using that service has been removed. The Car Parking TaFF would review the rates across the car parks in the District.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Overview Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Environmental Health and Car Parks Service be adopted.

Recommended to Cabinet by the Scrutiny Committee that the Service Plan 2021/22 for the Environmental Health and Car Parks Service be adopted.

(c) Housing

The Acting Service Lead for Housing provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. Highlights from the service plan included:

- Increase in homelessness, including an increase in families becoming homeless;
- Building confidence in tenants that the safety measures were in place for contractors to enter the property for necessary maintenance;
- How to increase housing stock;
- Strategic approach to retaining Right to Buy receipts;
- Green home grant success;
- Work of mobile support officers in helping tenants learn how to manage their income;
- Housing Safety Act implications;
- Full stock condition survey;
- Building resilience into the Homesafeguard Service.

The Portfolio Holder for Homes and Communities gave sincere thanks to the Acting Service Lead, the Strategic Lead for Housing, Health and Environment, and the Housing team, for their agility in adapting to new ways of working as well as dealing with the increase in workload.

Clarification and responses included:

- The work of mobile support officers in assisting tenants to learn how to manage their finances was intended to be for the Council's tenants only, as funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA); not for private sector tenants; if it proved successful, the service could be reviewed to expand to the private sector if funding was available;
- Homelessness costs were taken from the General Fund; some of the additional grant funding was likely to go towards the increase in cost in this sector;
- Clarification on the role of rough sleeper navigators as a form of outreach worker role. The work had been both pivotal and successful;
- Member thanks for the hard work undertaken by the Housing team.

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

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

(d) Streetscene

The Service Lead for Streetscene provided clarification and response to questions from Councillors in relation to the service plan for the service for 2021/22. Highlights from the service plan included:

- Acknowledgement of the increased value to the public of the public realm, parks and gardens and open spaces;
- Increase in budget for recycling and waste, due to the reduced value of recycled items and a driver pay rate increase;
- Implications of the new Environment Act;
- Review of deposit return scheme;
- Early negotiation of uplift in Recycling and Waste contract due to the predicted increase in properties to collect from exceeding 72k by September 2022;
- Team adaption to continued working on front line within social distancing guidelines.

The Portfolio Holder for Coast, Countryside and Environment gave sincere thanks to the Service Lead and the Streetscene team, including the Suez team, for continuing to deliver a fantastic service in the most trying of circumstances. He warned Members that the new Environment Act would bring considerable change, in terms of impact on kerbside collections, changes to fleet vehicles, and adapting flood alleviation schemes.

Clarification and responses included:

- Measures in place to help mitigate against infection included, including crew bubbles, PPE and distancing. In response to a question, some staff absence had occurred, but plans were in place to mitigate impact where possible;
- Seasonal cleansing staff will be employed again in preparation for the expected summer demand. If exceptional demand occurs again, the staffing level will be reviewed. The impact on staff morale was acknowledged;
- There was a trial in place to review the contamination issues associated with on street recycling;
- A drafted events strategy has been prepared for consideration by Cabinet, but has been delayed due to the latest lockdown. However planning and marketing of events can still take place for when restrictions lift, and demand remains for event space; currently work is targeted towards the Queens Drive offer and reviewing concessions for fitness events on the Council's beaches;
- Detail on the public toilet review will come forward to Cabinet in due course;
- Cllr Bond gave her thanks to the Engineering Projects Manager for his work in relation to flood alleviation at Feniton, describing his "tenacity as legendary";
- Request for signage on where to place recycling material to be updated at the Council's beaches;
- Confirmation that trialling electrical vehicles would also look at the savings for maintenance as well as carbon savings to give a true comparison.

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

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

Attendance List

Councillors present:

N Hookway (Chair)
M Allen
K Blakey
S Bond
B De Saram
S Gazzard
I Hall
M Hartnell
V Johns
F King
V Ranger
T Woodward
M Chapman
A Colman
O Davey
S Hawkins
T McCollum
H Parr
E Rylance
B Taylor

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

D Bickley
A Dent
B Ingham
M Rixson
I Thomas
M Armstrong
P Arnott
P Faithfull
J Bailey
P Hayward
S Jackson
G Jung
D Ledger
K McLauchlan
P Twiss
P Millar
A Moulding
J Rowland
E Wragg
T Wright
J Loudoun

Officers in attendance:

Mark Williams, Chief Executive
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead Governance and Licensing
Andrew Hancock, Service Lead StreetScene
Andrew Ennis, Service Lead Environmental Health and Car Parks

Ed Freeman, Service Lead Planning Strategy and Development Management
Jo Garfoot, Acting Housing Service Lead
Charles Plowden, Service Lead Countryside and Leisure
John Symes, Finance Manager
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor apologies:

C Wright