

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held Online via the Zoom app on 7 July 2022

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.01 pm and ended at 8.36 pm

10 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

11 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 9 June 2022 were accepted.

12 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

13 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

14 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential / exempt items.

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

There were no decisions by Cabinet called in for scrutiny.

16 Update on Poverty Dashboard

The Benefits Manager and the Information and Data Analysis Manager, Revenues and Benefits, presented an update on the Poverty Dashboard. It was noted that this had been re-named to the East Devon Social Resilience Dashboard, as the information does not solely relate to poverty.

The following key points were made:

- Work was continuing on creating public facing pages which it was hoped would be ready towards the end of the summer. Following further information received 11 July 2022, it is likely that the public facing dashboard will not be available until the end of the year or early 2023 due to licencing of the software that the dashboard uses.
- Historical data can be analysed for trends in the future.
- Key headlines shown were for Finance, Housing, Health and Employment and the Dashboard included the number of people living in relative or absolute poverty in the district.
- Data also flagged those at risk of falling into poverty.
- The root causes of hardship were identified with the top three causes being budgeting, mental health and physical health.

- The interactive timeline provided information on caseloads such as council tax and housing benefits and enabled the comparison of different caseloads over time.
- Data on council tax arrears was shown on a month by month basis and was broken down by council tax bands and the top ten wards.
- Energy Performance Certificates data provided information to assist residents with reducing their energy bills and could be linked to other caseloads.
- The information on the Dashboard assisted with designing policies and working practices such as the Discretionary Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme and can help identify and solve underlying issues faced by residents.
- The Dashboard also enabled partnership working with external organisations such as local schools and local groups. The dashboard has also been shown to the LGA and other councils.
- Work was on-going to provide further datasets and to bring in other tools to support low-income households including the vulnerable debt tool-kit and wider use of the standard financial statement.

Comments and questions from Councillors included the following points:

- Work was on-going to produce a simpler version of the Dashboard for use by Members, taking GDPR requirements into account.
- The Dashboard had been developed solely by Revenues and Benefits Officers at EDDC.
- There was concern that recent meetings of the Poverty Working Panel had been cancelled and Members were advised that this was due to insufficient business. The next meeting would be held in September.
- Definitions of relative and absolute poverty were included on the main page of the Dashboard and could be found on other websites such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Currently the data was split between working age and pension age residents and there was scope to explore further breakdown by age groups to identify whether any particular group was more affected than others.
- Voluntary and community groups could benefit from using the data.
- Regarding assisting with budgeting, the Financial Resilience Officers would work with residents to look at their circumstances in depth in order to educate people with monthly budgeting of income and expenditure.
- It was noted that approximately 70% of data is imported automatically into the Dashboard with the remaining manual work inputting data from external databases such as the DWP, although there was the potential to link directly to the DWP data in the future.
- Concern was expressed at the resources available to Citizens Advice East Devon, particularly over the difficult summer holiday period, and Officers would look into this and advise Members.

RECOMMENDATION

That options are explored to provide local voluntary and community groups with access to the data.

The Committee thanked Officers for their excellent work in developing the Dashboard.

17 People Data Annual Report 2021/22

The Corporate HR Manager introduced the People Data Annual Report 2021/2022 and advised that this comprised the Annual Report for the 2021/22 financial year and the more frequent report which is presented to the Personnel Committee and explained how this links with the Quarterly Performance Report presented to the Scrutiny Committee.

The following key points were noted:

- The reports are work in progress, with further improvements, for example a Dashboard similar to the Poverty Dashboard, planned in due course. The vacancy data reporting is also very new.
- Data will be helpful to assess the impact and effectiveness of various HR interventions, for example the impact of the Reward Review on recruitment and retention.
- The number of vacancies was currently high and had increased over recent months, which was also reflected in a projected increase in voluntary turnover and work would be needed to mitigate against this, including the current Reward Review.
- There was currently an increase in Covid-related sickness cases among staff, but this did not reflect all Covid cases, as some staff who felt well enough have been able to use the Worksmart provisions and work from home.
- Work was on-going to increase the use of apprenticeships, develop career pathways and engage with local schools and colleges in order to feed into a Grow Our Own approach and replicate work which the Corporate HR Manager had developed successfully in a previous role at Devon County Council. This would support longer term recruitment and retention as well as mitigate against the Council's age profile (with a current average age of 49 years).
- Equality and diversity data was now included in reporting.

Comments and questions from Members included the following:

- It was noted that with regard to gender and pay, there were more men in senior positions, which impacted on the Council's reported Gender Pay Gap and which the 'grow our own'/career pathways work would aim to mitigate against.
- The Corporate HR Manager would look into up to date information regarding ethnicity figures for the workforce compared with local district population figures when information was available from the latest census.
- Long term absence due to work related stress was a concern and it was noted that robust systems were in place to identify and implement support for staff in this situation.
- The number of apprenticeships was currently below target, the Council is required to work towards ambitious target levels set by Government and the 'grow our own' work will support this.
- It was noted that the number of vacancies across all sectors of the economy was unprecedented in recent times and all options were being considered to mitigate against staff turnover and to fill job vacancies.

The Committee noted the various concerns and expressed confidence in the Corporate HR Manager to address the issues raised.

18 **Quarterly performance report**

Comments and discussion of the Quarterly Performance Report included the following points:

- The percentage of planning appeals lost was noted and a question was raised as to how many of those were cases where the Planning Committee had gone against Officers' recommendations.
- It was noted that the Development Manager was looking into the data for planning appeals and was due to report to the Strategic Planning Committee.
- The Committee requested information regarding comparisons with other local planning authorities so as to better gauge how EDDC was performing with regard to appeals.
- The Committee noted the excellent work done in the west end of East Devon with particular reference to the heat network investment programme and work undertaken by the Growth, Development and Prosperity teams.
- Incidences of fly-tipping were noted and the Committee questioned how many had led to prosecutions. Incidences were in line with previous years and the number of prosecutions would be followed up and provided by the relevant Portfolio Holder.

- It was noted that numbers of prosecutions would be a useful addition to the report.
- Concern was raised that economic development should not be focussed solely on the west end of East Devon with the rural and coastal economy being over-looked.
- With regard to concerns relating to the rural and coastal economy, the Committee noted that a levelling-up bid was currently live for Seaton and Axminster. It was further noted that the deadline had been postponed and there was uncertainty regarding the new deadline due to recent events at Government level.
- It was noted that the Council needs to keep pushing for Government funding for towns and high streets.

19 **Forward Plan**

The Chair advised that a simplified proposal form had been put forward for consideration by the Committee. Once agreed, Officers could scope the issue and the detailed scoping form could be referred to the Chair and Vice-Chair for screening to ensure it was in line with the decision of the Committee.

Discussion on the amended proposal form included the following points:

- The outcome of any proposal put forward by Members should be agreed by the Committee rather than set out by an individual Councillor.
- Rather than asking Members to state the outcome of a proposal, the form could ask what it was that Members wished to see achieved.

The Committee was in agreement that the wording on page 2 of the amended proposal form should read 'please describe as precisely as possible what you would like to see achieved' and that the form as amended would be used going forward.

Discussion on the Forward Plan included the following:

- It was noted that car parking now came under the Finance Portfolio.
- The Committee noted the constitutional requirements and powers of the Scrutiny Committee with regard to the attendance of Portfolio Holders.
- The brief for what was required regarding Portfolio Holder reports needed to be clarified well in advance and it was noted that, currently, there is a lack of officer resource and time and difficulties with recruitment.
- Portfolio Holder reports could include an update on key current work and issues in line with what was already set out in the Council Plan.
- Members were invited to email the Chair with suggestions for what should be included in upcoming Portfolio Holder reports and the Chair would clarify in each case what the Committee is proposing.
- Concerns were expressed with regard to the handling of Portfolio Holder reports at previous meetings and assurances were given that the role of Scrutiny Committee was to be a critical friend.

The Committee was in agreement that Portfolio Holders should write reports on whatever matters are of interest or of current importance in their Portfolio and that the reports would be circulated in advance to all Councillors to provide a framework for Members to ask questions.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Allen (Chair)

J Bonetta (Vice-Chair for this meeting)

A Bruce

M Chapman
J Kemp
D Key
H Parr
J Whibley

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

M Armstrong
P Arnott
B Ingham
V Johns
G Jung
D Ledger
D Manley
P Millar
A Moulding
J Rowland
P Skinner

Officers in attendance:

Sharon Church, Benefits Manager
Joanna Fellows, Corporate HR Manager
Wendy Harris, Democratic Services Officer
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
George Whitlock, Data Analyst
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (and Deputy Monitoring Officer)

Councillor apologies:

V Ranger
J Bailey
O Davey
C Gardner
S Hawkins
E Rylance
T Woodward

Chair

Date: