

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber Blackdown House on 1 December 2022

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.13 pm and ended at 8.15 pm

54 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

55 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 November 2022 were agreed and signed as a true record.

56 Declarations of interest

Minute 60 Portfolio Holder Annual Report - Sustainable Homes and Communities. Councillor Jake Bonetta, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Councillor is the Chair of Food Save, a local community organisation.

57 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

The Chair requested feedback on the recent scrutiny training provided by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. Members agreed that the training had been helpful and informative and that it had been very useful to refresh their knowledge.

58 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential / exempt items.

59 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 for scrutiny.

60 Portfolio Holder Annual Report - Sustainable Homes and Communities

Cllr Dan Ledger, Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities, presented his report and thanked all of the officers involved for their help in preparing the report. Cllr Ledger advised that staff are under huge pressure with a mounting workload.

The report highlighted the following points:

- A number of grants had recently been received which had meant that additional staff could be employed to provide homelessness support.
- There is currently a large amount of casework across multiple departments trying to address homelessness.

- Three Ukrainian families are currently in temporary accommodation and 56 families or individuals are in temporary accommodation in the district.
- The Poverty Working Group has now moved to a policy monitoring phase.
- A new Community Development Manager has been appointed which will assist with delivering the Housing Winter Pressures Plan.
- With regard to strategic asset management, the housing stock condition survey and decarbonisation, the team has been very short staffed with multiple officers undertaking the role of two people due to ongoing issues with recruitment.
- There is currently a large number of void properties and it was highlighted that the cost of turning around a void property should be around £2,500. Recent costs have been between £6,000 - £8,000 due in part to the age of the housing stock or the way the property was treated by previous tenants. Further work needs to be undertaken around recovery of these costs.
- The stock condition survey will result in difficult decisions of a strategic nature, including potential disposal of ageing properties.
- It was noted that Ian Williams contractors are increasing their workload in order to deal with current demand and this was applauded.
- The Homes for Ukraine scheme has meant increased pressure on staff and the Portfolio Holder acknowledged the hard work that has gone into delivering the scheme.
- Attention was drawn to the work of the Housing Task Force in increasing delivery of both affordable and social housing across the district.

In response to questions from Members, the following points were made:

- With regard to the high turnover of tenants and the cost of work on void properties, the age of the stock could be contributing to the issue as tenants move to better properties. Work was needed over the next twelve months to better understand the data and the reasons behind turnover levels.
- Regarding retro-fitting properties, a Government grant of approx. £1.5m has been received for the first round of work, with a further funding bid having recently been submitted for work to increase energy efficiency.
- The Portfolio Holder has met with many voluntary sector providers across the district and aims to increase networking and highlight opportunities for grant funding for the sector.
- Officers are currently working on identifying developable housing opportunities across the district in order to increase housing stock.
- Damp and mould issues are dealt with as soon as the Council is made aware of a problem and a damp and mould policy is shortly to be presented to the Housing Review Board. A new contractor has recently been appointed to review all properties with regard to installing proper ventilation. Early intervention, with tenants informing the Council of issues as soon as possible, is critical, followed by immediate repairs and a good communication strategy to educate tenants with regard to ventilating properties to reduce the occurrence of damp and mould.
- Some of the housing stock will not be able to be brought up to an acceptable standard of decarbonisation and will not be re-let when tenants leave. The Housing Task Force is currently working on this issue alongside the stock condition survey.
- The recent edition of the tenants' magazine, Housing Matters, was considered to be very good.
- The Portfolio Holder would follow up on the matter of putting out communications regarding the large number of grants and assistance available to residents, either through the Council or via other means.

The Portfolio Holder was thanked for his report.

61 **Quarterly Performance Report**

With regard to the Quarterly Performance Report, the following points were made:

- The Committee discussed the use of paper agendas and noted that Councillors were using both iPads and paper agendas in some meetings, which may be an unintended consequence of meeting in person and not having access to multiple screens in meetings.
- The high number of days lost to sickness, and in particular stress, was noted.
- With regard to the review of compliance procedures by an external body and the lack of progress due to issues with recruitment, it was noted that the compliance procedures in question relate to matters such as fire safety and asbestos.

The Quarterly Performance Report was received and noted.

62 **Forward Plan**

It was noted that the Chair had requested an additional meeting in 2023 in order to complete the work programme and that this was proposed, and subsequently agreed to be held on 9th March 2023. It was also noted that the April meeting would be likely to fall in the period of purdah. The revised forward plan was tabled and agreed.

The Committee discussed the procedure for adding items to the Scrutiny Committee agenda and noted that the process was slow for bringing matters forward for discussion.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that officers require clarity of what exactly the Committee is looking to scrutinise and that having more information set out by Councillors on the proposal form would enable officers to produce reports more easily, which could speed up the process.

The Committee discussed the example of scrutinising the use of Blackdown House post Covid as a possible future agenda item.

Further discussion included the Portfolio Holder reports and whether there should be greater clarity and targeting as to what the Committee is looking to consider, rather than just receive a general overview of a particular service.

It was noted that very few Committee members had been present at the previous meeting, and at this meeting, to hear the Portfolio Holder reports.

63 **Update on draft Training Strategy**

The Portfolio Holder for Democracy, Transparency and Communications presented an update on the draft Training Strategy which included the following points:

- An update on meetings of the Member Development Working Group which had considered post-election induction training, refresher training, information for prospective Councillors and current and future training needs.
- Key points had emerged such as Councillors needing to be aware that some Committees are statutory and require Members to be trained before sitting on the Committee eg. Licensing & Enforcement, Planning.
- Attendance at mandatory training could be published on the Council's website.
- A Member training survey was circulated to all Councillors, with a response rate of 33%, although useful information was collected.
- The benefits of ongoing refresher training needed to be made clear as legislation changes and Members need to be kept up to date.

- Safeguarding has recently been added to the list of mandatory training and it was noted that, although requested specifically by Councillors and offered at a cost on different days and times, only just over 50% of Councillors responded to the Democratic Services Team.
- It was suggested that attendance at mandatory training should be added as a key performance indicator on a quarterly basis and potentially published on Members' profiles on the website in order to encourage attendance which, to date, has not been good.
- A Member Development Plan will shortly be prepared for the forthcoming elections which will include mandatory training immediately after the election, followed by phased training due to the large volume of information for new Councillors.
- It is difficult to plan the resource requirements for training as this depends largely on the form of delivery, whether in person or online.
- Some training could be offered in-house such as Planning and some online.
- The Member Development Working Group is proposing an estimated budget for training after the elections of £10,000.

The Portfolio Holder outlined the recommendations which would be made to Cabinet and included the following:

- To adopt the Member Development plan which specifies the mandatory elements of training.
- That the Code of Conduct is revised so as to recognise the mandatory training and that failure to attend would be a breach of the Code of Conduct.
- Attendance at mandatory training would be uploaded to Members' profiles on the website and included in the key performance indicators in the quarterly performance report.
- It was recognised that, on occasions, Councillors may not be able to attend mandatory training and methods should be available to enable Members to catch up.
- A budget of £10,000 be made available.

In response to questions from Members, the following points were made:

- Regarding training for Councillors elected mid-term, it was noted that it was difficult to obtain the necessary knowledge, particularly where the new Member did not have the support of a political group. It was recognised that the assistance of the Democratic Services team was invaluable and that key learning resources, such as videos and online training should be made available to new Councillors.
- It was proposed to develop a list of key officer contacts to facilitate induction.
- It was noted that refresher training is important as Members need to be kept up to date with changes to legislation.
- It was further noted that training on planning and licensing would also be helpful for Councillors who are not on those Committees but may respond to planning or licensing applications.
- The Mod.Gov library would be checked and updated for training content as this is a useful central resource.
- It was recognised that Councillors needed to have training in IT from the start in order to access other training.
- It would be beneficial to look at the training provided by other local authorities.
- Other resources are available such as through the LGA or resources provided to officers and would be followed up by the Portfolio Holder.

The Portfolio Holder was thanked for her update.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Allen (Vice-Chair for this meeting)

J Bailey

J Bonetta
O Davey
J Kemp (Chair for this meeting)
H Parr

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

S Jackson
G Jung
D Ledger
J Rowland

Officers in attendance:

Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (and Deputy Monitoring Officer)

Councillor apologies:

A Bruce
M Chapman
C Gardner
S Hawkins
D Key
E Rylance
B Taylor
J Whibley
T Woodward

Chair

Date: