

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the joint budget meeting of the Overview Committee and Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 11 January 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 9.00 am and ended at 3.19 pm

40 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous joint meeting held on 11 January 2023 and 12 January 2023 were agreed and signed as a correct record.

41 Declarations of interest

Minute 47. Countryside and Leisure.

Councillor Tim Dumper, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Councillor is a member of Exmouth Town Council which is mentioned in relation to the pilot scheme for a festival initiative.

Minute 47. Countryside and Leisure.

Councillor Vicky Johns, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Councillor works for an art charity and is a member of the Arts and Culture East Devon network.

Cllr Vicky Johns also wished it to be recorded for minute 50 that she is a member of Ottery Town Council.

42 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

43 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

44 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential/exempt items.

45 Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets 2024-2025 and Draft Council Plan

The Finance Director introduced this item and provided a verbal summary of the following:

- A budget overview
- An outline of key points concerning the detailed budgets as presented in the budget books
- How the budget fits in with service planning
- The emerging Council Plan and how this links to the budget.

The joint committees were informed that the budget would be revisited following discussion of individual service plans, to draw together final recommendations for Cabinet and to consider the implication of these recommendations on the budget.

The draft budget had been adopted by Cabinet and the recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the Housing Review Board would go back to Cabinet on 31 January 2024.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- Members expressed concern about the financial risk associated with the service payment to LED Community Leisure, and it was noted that concerns were also raised at last year's joint budget meeting.
- It is unacceptable that the LED management fee report to the LED Monitoring Forum was issued late, putting a strain on the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet to agree a budget when agreement of the management fee is outstanding. The Chair asked that Officers take this matter up with LED.
- The LED Monitoring Forum is scrutinising closely the costs involved in LED. The Forum is looking at putting together a service level agreement to ensure that the Council is presented with financial information in a format which enables an understanding early in the budget process of what is required. This work is ongoing.
- Emergency work to repair recent storm damage to the roof and building at Ocean is covered jointly by this Council's insurance and that of LED. Any claim for loss of income will be through LED's own insurance.
- Should members feel that beach matting is a priority, there is scope for this within the revenue budget. The costs set out in the papers are for procurement of the matting only, whereas costs for storage over winter are covered within normal salary budgets.
- Following a recommendation from last year's joint budget meeting, a piece of work was carried out by Strategic Leisure which sought to identify areas of potential duplication between LED and the private sector to ensure that LED was not being paid to carry out work which is being done elsewhere. The Assistant Director – Countryside and Leisure was asked to share the report arising from this work with all members.

The Chair thanked the Finance Manager and his Officers for the report and their good work.

46 **Key Service Plan Objectives 2024-2025**

The Committees considered the service plan objectives for the following services:

- Countryside and Leisure
- Environmental Health
- Housing
- Streetscene
- HR and Payroll Service
- Finance
- Revenues & Benefits, CSC, Fraud and Compliance
- Growth, Development and Prosperity
- Planning
- Governance and Licensing
- Place, Assets and Commercialisation
- Communications, Digital Services and Engagement Team

47 **Countryside and Leisure**

The Assistant Director – Countryside and Leisure introduced this item and outlined the key service plan objectives for the Countryside and Leisure service.

The Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment thanked the Assistant Director – Countryside and Leisure and his team for another successful year, and their good work on countryside biodiversity and nature recovery.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- It would be appropriate for this council to work closely with towns and parishes on environmental initiatives, to avoid duplication of effort and expenditure.
- The Forestry Commission have their own jurisdiction and are able to issue felling licences without consulting EDDC, so it is difficult for this council to influence the Forestry Commission's decisions.
- There is a need to understand the consequence on the tree safety budget of planting more trees, and it is anticipated that the emerging Tree Policy will pick up on this. The Streetscene and Countryside and Leisure services will also be looking together at future resource to deal with ash dieback.
- Responsibility for highways trees sits with Devon County Council, whereas EDDC is responsible for Tree Preservation Orders and trees in conservation areas. Tree officers within the Devon districts work collaboratively, sharing thoughts and ideas particularly when developing policy and strategy.
- A Member suggested that consideration is given to redesigning the Beer Jubilee gardens so that it has a mixture of biodiversity.
- The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty review is a 5-year review which constitutes business as usual for the Countryside and Leisure service.
- The Ecology team includes a Trainee Ecologist post, the job description for which is currently being developed.
- Section 2.1.1 of the service plan sets out that a 10% Biodiversity Net Gain policy for East Devon will be included in the biodiversity chapter and supporting evidence of the new local plan; this percentage aligns with government guidance but an aspiration of 20% is set out in the local plan, subject to the local plan review process.

48 **Environmental Health**

The Assistant Director – Environmental Health presented the service plan objectives and key projects for 2024 – 25 for the Environmental Health service, and invited questions.

The Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment thanked the Assistant Director for the good work carried out by the Environmental Health team, much of which is under the radar and addressing antisocial behaviour.

The Portfolio Holder Climate Action and Emergency Response thanked the Assistant Director and the Climate Change Officer for the work they have done regarding climate action.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- Concern was raised about sewage overflows and the illegal pumping of raw sewage into the sea. South West Water (SWW) is attending a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 1 February 2024 and the Environmental Health service is looking for opportunities to work with SWW and the Environment Agency (EA) in the most efficient way possible with a view to ensuring SWW meet their responsibilities. Most enforcement powers in relation to sewage overflows sit with the EA.
- The Climate Change strategy will be in a form which can be shared with towns and parishes.
- The Environmental Health service has powers to force people to bring empty private sector properties back into use. However, the service first aims to support people to address issues and understand what options are available, and a strategy will set out the service's approach.

- An Enforcement Policy covers environmental protection, including fly tipping.
- The final version of the Climate Change action plan is unlikely to be published in the current financial year [2023-24], but the work on this is ongoing.
- The service is working to fine tune the Emergency Planning and Business Continuity arrangements.
- The Environmental Health service is adequately resourced and carrying few vacancies. The focus will be on succession planning, going forward.

49 **Housing**

The Assistant Director – Housing Strategy and Operations presented the service plan objectives and projects for 2024-2025 for the Housing service. She outlined recent changes to how the Housing service is delivered, and invited questions.

The Leader highlighted the significant change of leadership within the Housing service and welcomed both the Assistant Director and the Director of Housing, Health and Environment who are both new to the organisation.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- The service will be exploring how the Home Safeguard provision is delivered following the PSTN switch off at the end of 2025.
- It is intended that a Housing Performance Officer and a Housing Performance Lead will look at complaints about repairs, ensuring a plan is in place to rectify issues and identifying where there are points of failure. An objective will be added into the service plan regarding complaints and how they are dealt with.
- It was suggested the Assistant Directors revisit the objectives set out at sections 2.1.7 to 2.1.14 of the service plan to consider how they link to the climate change agenda.
- An objective will be added into the service plan concerning the replacement of white goods and carpets at the end of a tenancy with a view to fixtures and fittings being retained, where possible.
- It would be appropriate to include an objective in the service plan concerning empty homes and how departments and services work together to rectify the issues.
- Further scrutiny of the Housing service plan will take place at the meeting of Housing Review Board on 25th January 2024, with onward recommendations to Cabinet.

50 **Streetscene**

The Assistant Director – Streetscene presented the service plan objectives and projects for 2024-2025 for the Streetscene service, and invited questions.

The Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment thanked the Streetscene and Suez teams for their work and exemplary service.

Thanks were expressed to the Assistant Director, the Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment and the Engineering Projects Manager for their work in securing funding for the Sidmouth Beach Management Plan.

Questions, clarification and responses included the following points:

- In-house resources are very squeezed but the team work within their means to deliver projects. Project management costs are being built into the capital programme to allow for project management, and consideration will need to be given to how project management resource is added to various projects, whether through a contractor, another council or recruiting directly into the team..

- Streetscene operate more in towns than in rural locations as EDDC has more responsibility and land ownings in town areas. Where necessary, a React team can be sent to do a clean up in villages..
- A lot of work is going into decarbonising the Suez fleet but there are limitations to what can be done at the present time, for a number of reasons. Decarbonised fleet is likely to be part of the post-2026 contract renewal and a strategy will need to be created for how this is done, which will include looking at available funding streams.
- There is a service plan objective to assess the Green Flag or Parks Award potential for Beer Jubilee, and a list will be produced of the necessary works to get this area to the required standards. In the meantime, improvements are being carried out within the means available and as set out in a management plan.
- There have been complaints about grass maintenance in children's play areas, and parks officers can discuss with towns and parishes the council's approach to managing these sites.
- The Environment Agency manages flood grant funding on behalf of Defra; the criteria for funding is complex and due to the increase in construction costs, the funding from government is often insufficient to cover costs.
- The council has a corporate virtual funding team to looking at available grant funding for projects, but there is no specific officer within the Streetscene service to carry out this work.
- 240m of the sea wall at Exmouth has been identified as likely not having a foundation, and the current repair to the sea wall will address a wider section than is currently cracked with a view to future-proofing the structure. Consideration will be given to wider implications for the whole frontage, under the Exmouth Beach Management Plan project.
- Several Members highlighted the benefits of beach matting for disabled people to be able to enjoy the beach with their families, and expressed a desire for the beach matting item to be included in the budget.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director for the service plan and the quality of the work carried out by the Streetscene team.

Recommendation

The inclusion in 2024 – 25 of a budget for beach matting at Beer, Budleigh and Sidmouth.

51 HR and Payroll Service

The Corporate Lead HR and Payroll introduced this item and ran through the key service plan objectives for the HR and Payroll Service.

The Portfolio Holder Council and Corporate Co-ordination thanked the Corporate Lead and her officers for their successful work over the past year, and remarked on the significance of the service which underpins everything that goes on within the Council.

The Leader thanked the Portfolio Holder Council and Corporate Co-ordination for his work on the Personnel Committee, and welcomed the contribution of both the Corporate Lead, Communications, Digital Services and Engagement Team and the Corporate Lead HR and Payroll to the Executive Leadership Team.

Questions, clarification and responses included:

- It was appropriate to advertise the CEO vacancy externally, in order to test the market.
- Thanks were expressed to the Corporate Lead for her work with updating the Armed Forces Covenant.
- Green travel for councillors and officers forms part of the wider Green Travel Plan.

- The Democratic Services Manager is looking into a broad member awareness session covering the role and responsibilities of the Personnel Committee.
- It is appropriate for this Council to support the health and wellbeing of Members. The Corporate Lead has been exploring with the Democratic Services Manager whether the Employee Assistance Programme can be extended to Members, and proposals will come forward.
- The Grant Thornton report is feeding into the upcoming Peer Review, which will in turn inform the People Strategy.
- Staff were invited to complete an Investors in People survey last year and this superseded the staff survey that would otherwise have taken place during 2022.

52 **Finance**

The Finance Director outlined the key service plan objectives for the Finance service and invited questions.

Questions, clarification and responses included:

- Implementation of a new Finance system is Strata's biggest project and the system is due to go live for this Council in April 2024.
- A draft Car Parking Strategy will be brought to Overview Committee this year, and will cover arrangements for coaches, campervans and motorhomes.
- The EDDC Procurement Strategy aligns with the National Procurement Framework, in terms of best practice. To get best value out of procurement, the Council also signs up to national frameworks, supported by Devon County Council, which enables the Council to access the controls and tendering process that are in place.

53 **Revenue & Benefits, CSC, Fraud and Compliance**

The Assistant Director – Revenues and Benefits, CSC, Fraud and Compliance introduced this item and ran through the key service plan objectives for the Revenues and Benefits, CSC, Fraud and Compliance service.

Questions, clarification and responses included:

- Whilst not specifically mentioned in the service plan, the service is working with the VCSE (Devon Communities Together) to explore the specific needs of disabled people in poverty by looking at the data and case studies to identify if there is a theme, with a view to understanding how this group can be better supported.
- Write offs of Housing Benefit overpayments occur for a range of reasons. All write offs are carried out in accordance with the procedure set out in this Council's Constitution, and are included in the Council's annual audit.

54 **Growth, Development and Prosperity**

The Assistant Director – Growth, Development and Prosperity introduced this item and ran through the key service plan objectives for the Growth, Development and Prosperity service, including the key drivers of change that have impacted upon the service plan for 2024-2025, and specific priority projects.

The Portfolio Holder Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism thanked the Assistant Director and his officers for the delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural Engagement Prosperity Fund, and for the Tourism Strategy. He commented on the

success of the Tourism Network which has provided useful feedback on what is a critical industry for the district.

The Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment also expressed thanks to the Growth, Development and Prosperity team for their assistance to his portfolio. He welcomed the delivery of measures in relation to both the habitat mitigation and green infrastructure strategies, and the work taking place to provide a source of low carbon heat for Cranbrook.

Questions, clarification and responses included:

- A formal programme will be brought to the Cranbrook Strategic Delivery Board for delivery of the masterplan for Cranbrook town centre.
- The Assistant Director – Growth, Development and Prosperity expressed confidence that the service has access to the resource and specific expertise it needs to move key projects forward, including revenue funding to draw on a wider set of external consultants.
- There is a group which draws on relevant surveying and planning expertise within the organisation to support the objective of working to increase the supply of available commercial sites and premises in the district. The expertise within the group facilitates an understanding of where progress is being made and any issues that that are causing projects to stall.

55 **Planning**

The Assistant Director Planning Strategy and Development Management presented the service objectives and key projects for 2024 – 25. The Assistant Director particularly highlighted the following:

- The Reg 19 draft of the new Local Plan.
- Recruitment of the new Planning Obligations team and development of the work programme.
- Adoption of a new Playing Pitch Strategy.
- Completion of the water cycle study.
- Work to progress development of a second new community in the district.

It was noted that the production of the Cranbrook Town Centre Masterplan had not been included in the service plan.

Questions from Members and responses included the following points:

- Regarding recovery of costs in the Building Control service, costs could only be recovered on the non-statutory elements and not on statutory elements such as enforcement. Various changes are expected to the relevant regulations, and Building Control charges and costs will be reviewed when the changes are known.
- Adverts are currently being prepared for the recruitment of the 4 posts in the Planning Obligations team. An interim S.106 Officer is in place with a further interim appointment expected shortly.
- The water cycle study would assist with understanding capacity in the South West Water infrastructure across the District and would inform the new Local Plan. If infrastructure is found to be insufficient, EDDC would engage with South West Water to understand how required infrastructure would be brought forward and new development phased to reduce impact on water courses and flooding.
- Regarding training for town and parish councils, it was anticipated that an initial programme would be in place by April with the first events being held in June.

- With regard to the previous year's budget of £100k for nutrient neutrality, this had part funded the District Ecologist post, the credit scheme for projects and in-house work on housing stock.
- It was noted that Planning Officers would have regard to the need for a new sewage treatment plant at the second new community as this had not been provided at Cranbrook.
- Work on the Playing Pitch Strategy was nearing completion.

There was discussion on whether a specific budget line for planning appeals could be included in the budget in order to support planning decisions. It was noted that a budget line had not been included as a year could pass without the need to draw on budgeted funds. The Director of Finance advised that this could be considered.

The Assistant Director Planning Strategy and Development Management was thanked for the service plan and for the work of his team.

Recommendations

1. That a budget for planning appeals within the Planning budget be created;
2. That the Cranbrook Town Centre Masterplan be included in the Planning Strategy.

56 Governance and Licensing

The Director of Governance and Licensing presented the service objectives and key projects for 2024 – 25 and highlighted the following:

- Review of the Constitution.
- Strengthening working relationships with the Police in relation to the handling of code of conduct complaints relating to Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.
- Review of Licensing fees.
- Recruitment of a new Cemeteries Registrar and upskilling of the Licensing team in this area.
- Conducting a Member satisfaction survey and Member skills audit.
- Holding of potentially 2 elections during the year.
- Set up of an Information Governance Board.

It was noted that the report from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny was due imminently. It was also noted that additional training sessions would be provided for those Members who had not previously undertaken the mandatory training.

The Portfolio Holder for Council and Corporate Co-ordination thanked the Democratic Services team for their work and the Portfolio Holder for Coast, Country and Environment thanked Cllr Whibley for his work in chairing the Licensing Committee.

The Director of Governance and Licensing was thanked for the service plan and on-going work.

57 Place, Assets and Commercialisation

The Assistant Director, Place, Assets and Commercialisation presented the service objectives and key projects for 2024 – 25. The service objectives included both internal and external focussed projects including the following:

- Adoption of new General Fund Asset Management Plan for 2024 – 29.
- Office accommodation strategy.

- Delivery of outcomes of public toilets review.
- Review of depots.
- Swimming pools decarbonisation project.
- Exmouth placemaking and wider placemaking across the District.
- Delivery of employment sites owned by EDDC at Honiton, Seaton and Axminster.

The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism thanked the Assistant Director and his team for their work and in particular, for the work on category A public toilets review, Exmouth Placemaking plan and the decarbonisation of leisure centres.

The Leader highlighted the progress with Seaton Jurassic as a real achievement.

Discussion, questions and responses included the following points:

- A huge amount of work has been undertaken with regard to Exmouth placemaking and the plan needs to be agreed before physical progress becomes visible. Progress on the ground should be visible over the coming months.
- With regard to the Exmouth Pavilion Theatre, it was noted that the building comes under the remit of this service, whilst operational matters fall under the Countryside service.

The Assistant Director was thanked for his service plan and on-going work.

58 **Communications, Digital Services and Engagement Team**

The Corporate Lead, Communications, Digital Services and Engagement presented the service objectives and key projects for 2024 – 25 and introduced the 4 teams within the service.

The Portfolio Holder for Council and Corporate Co-ordination thanked the Management Information Officer for her work on the emerging Council Plan and the management of performance information.

The Leader welcomed the Corporate Lead to the senior leadership team which highlights that EDDC is an outward facing Council. The newly introduced Councillors' update was welcomed.

It was noted that key aspirations for the year include greater integration of Microsoft Teams and an improved system for online complaints.

The Corporate Lead was thanked for his service plan and the work of the team.

59 **Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets 2024-2025**

The Director of Finance summarised the meeting and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees voted by Committee and agreed the following recommendations to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

1. The joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees recommend the draft Revenue and Capital budgets 2024 – 25 to Cabinet for adoption, with the following amendments to be considered:
 - a) The creation of a budget for planning appeals within the Planning budget

- b) The inclusion in 2024 – 25 of a budget for beach matting at Beer, Budleigh and Sidmouth.
2. That the Service Plans considered during the meeting of the joint committees on 11th January 2024 are recommended to Cabinet, having regard to the comments made by members as follows:
 - a) The inclusion of the Cranbrook Town Centre Masterplan in the Planning Strategy.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

J Brown
M Chapman
B Collins
R Collins
M Goodman (Chair)
A Hall (Co-Chair)
J Heath
V Johns
B Bailey
T Dumper
P Fernley
Y Levine
T Olive

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

R Jefferies
G Jung
J Loudoun
C Brown
P Arnott
K Bloxham

Officers in attendance:

Matthew Blythe, Assistant Director Environmental Health
Simon Davey, Director of Finance
Joanna Fellows, Corporate Lead - HR and Payroll
Andrew Hancock, Assistant Director StreetScene
Andrew Hopkins, Corporate Lead - Communications, Digital Services and Engagement
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Charles Plowden, Assistant Director Countryside and Leisure
Melanie Wellman, Director of Governance & Licensing (Monitoring Officer)
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (Deputy Monitoring Officer)
Tracy Hendren, Director of Housing, Health and Environment
Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Customer Access, Fraud & Compliance
Andrew Wood, Assistant Director Growth Development and Prosperity
Tim Child, Assistant Director Place, Assets & Commercialisation
Ed Freeman, Assistant Director Planning Strategy and Development Management
Emma Congerton, Assistant Director Housing Strategy & Operations
John Symes, Finance Manager

Jo Avery, Management Information Officer

Councillor apologies:

- I Barlow
- D Mackinder
- S Smith
- A Toye
- J Whibley
- C Nicholas
- M Martin
- H Riddell

Chair

Date: