

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 13 June 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.46 pm

1 Minutes of the previous meetings held on 4 April 2024 and 18 April 2024

The minutes of the previous meetings held on 4 April 2024 and 18 April 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

2 Declarations of interest

Minute 8. Review of Emergency Responses in 2023/4 by East Devon District Council. Councillor Vicky Johns, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Councillor is a member of Ottery St Mary Town Council which distributes sand bags in the event of local flooding.

3 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

4 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

5 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential / exempt items.

6 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 by Members for scrutiny in accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

7 Improving green spaces for wildlife

The StreetScene Operations Manager presented the report which set out the approach, objectives for and reasoning behind targeted wildlife improvement areas. The report covered the management of designated wildlife improvement areas, legislation, policies and strategies that apply to the development and designation of wildlife improvement areas, management systems, stakeholders consultations, communication with residents and similar work by other local authorities.

The StreetScene Operations Manager highlighted the following points from the report:

- Not all green spaces in East Devon are managed by the StreetScene team as some are managed by other bodies such as DCC, town and parish councils or EDDC's Countryside / Wild East Devon team.

- The way green spaces are managed is crucial particularly in light of the loss of wildlife and bio-diversity across Devon.
- Management of wildlife improvement areas is a key priority in the Council Plan for creating a Greener East Devon and aligns with the priorities set out in the Council's Climate Change Strategy, Action Plan and the legislated Nature Recovery Plan.
- As wildlife improvement areas are all public realm, StreetScene recognises the need for on-going communication with residents regarding how the areas are created and managed. The team will be working on a communications campaign to educate residents with the help of councillors and local town and parish councils.
- All wildlife improvement areas are now mapped and can be viewed on the Council's website.
- Recommendation 6 of the report [page 12] is key to supporting good communication with residents moving forwards.

The Chair thanked Officers for their comprehensive and informative report.

Responses to questions from Members and discussion included the following points:

- Areas such as tree copses are considered vital for the sustainability of small mammals. The recent planting of the Exmouth Tiny Forest provides an example of newly planted trees and will be monitored over the next decade to assess the benefits to bio-diversity.
- As StreetScene does not have an Ecologist within the team, it is important that the team works with local groups, such as the Exmouth Wildlife Group, which provide vital support to StreetScene's work.
- Concern was expressed regarding mowing in Brixington Park, Exmouth which could be detrimental to small mammals. The StreetScene Operations Manager and the Horticultural Technical Officer agreed to give this point further consideration.
- There was discussion regarding the up-keep of closed cemeteries such as Beer Cemetery and concern was expressed that the area around graves should be kept well maintained out of respect for the deceased. The Horticultural Technical Officer advised that improvements were being made to the management of the western section of Beer Cemetery which is not a wildlife improvement area.
- There was concern that there is not always a clear distinction between formal maintained areas and areas designated for wildlife improvement. It was noted that this should be monitored closely to ensure that maintained areas are clearly kept in good condition and that any wildlife areas are mown along the edges ie. by the side of pavements etc. so that the areas are clearly defined.
- With regard to the use of yellow rattle to suppress grasses and increase biodiversity, it was noted that it can take several years to see any improvement. Use of the cut and collect mowers to scarify the ground will support the growth of yellow rattle.
- The Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment outlined the process by which EDDC takes on the management of closed cemeteries and the challenge of striking the right balance between respectful maintenance and enabling re-wilding.
- With regard to a query about Winters Lane at Ottery St Mary, it was noted that this site will be re-assessed in the next few months and consultation will be undertaken with a view to under-canopy planting such as hazel and buckthorn.
- Concern was expressed regarding basic maintenance of public open spaces in Seaton and good, timely maintenance could assist with public perception and support for wildlife improvement areas. It was noted that glyphosate had been banned on EDDC land since 2022, and this, together with mild winters and wetter springs has led to greater challenges with the maintenance of public open spaces.
- The Council has a definite role to play in leading and inspiring residents to follow the aims of wildlife improvement, however, the messaging needs to correctly identify and explain what is re-wilding or improving areas for wildlife.
- Real progress will be made when residents follow EDDC's example of improving areas for wildlife.

- Greater involvement of community groups, town and parish councils and schools would assist with encouraging residents' involvement, communications and managing resident's expectations.
- It was noted that the environment, sensitivities and residents' expectations are different in every area and that this would be an ongoing evolving project. A holistic approach to ongoing communications is needed.

It was noted that the Horticultural Technical Officer would be happy to provide workshops for new Councillors to increase awareness as part of the induction process. It was agreed that Officers would consider the use of clear and easily recognisable signage to indicate wildlife improvement areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

The Scrutiny Committee recommends that Cabinet:

1. Reviews the reasons that the Managing Sites for Wildlife approach was adopted and how this came about.
2. Endorses the approaches and amended process of wildlife improvement practices, and notes the wider Nature Recovery Work being led by Countryside.
3. Approves wider communication to Councillors regarding this approach, with a feature in the Councillor update and reconsiders communication with residents, towns and parishes to increase positive interaction.
4. Provides any further recommendations for supporting the important strategy of transitioning traditionally maintained green spaces to wildlife improvement areas within climatic (eg. mild winters and wet springs) and budgeting constraints.
5. Agrees that Councillors increase their awareness of the reasoning and history of this approach and how it relates to central and local government legislative and policy frameworks.
6. Agrees that Councillors help disseminate this message to residents / voters in order to bridge the gap between Council strategy and residents' expectations of wildlife improvement areas and the continual transition of EDDC-owned green spaces from traditionally mown grass areas to wildlife havens. This will help StreetScene continue to align its targeted work with the legislative framework and Council-wide agendas, policies, strategies and action plans.
7. Endorses that the Council continues to work with voluntary and community groups across the District.
8. Supports that the Wildlife Improvement Strategy is brought back to the Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.

The Chair thanked Officers for attending the meeting.

8 Review of Emergency Responses in 2023/4 by East Devon District Council

The Assistant Director Environmental Health presented the report which outlined the Emergency Planning and Response work undertaken in the year 2023 / 24 with particular reference to the floods in May and September 2023 and subsequent work based on lessons learned. The Assistant Director Environmental Health highlighted the following points in the report:

- The Council is defined in law as a 'Category 1' responder to emergencies which places certain responsibilities on the Council.
- The Council is an active partner in the Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Resilience Forum and a member of the Devon Emergency Planning Partnership which provides support with specialist administrative tasks.

- An Emergency Planning Officer is employed by the Council, based in the Environmental Health Service.
- Weather related risks and incidents dominated the period covered by the report and it was noted that weather warnings from the Met Office are improving, supported by flood alerts from the Environment Agency, both of which assist with emergency planning.
- Weather warnings and flood alerts are widely disseminated to assist Council staff and town and parish councils to increase local resilience.
- Members' attention was drawn to the highly localised flash floods in the Otter Valley in May 2023 and storm damage to the seawall at Exmouth caused by Storm Ciaran in November 2023.
- The flash floods in the Otter Valley had highlighted that EDDC was responsible for the recovery phase due to the localised nature of the incident. The response had emphasised the need for multi-agency partnership working. The work done at the time had resulted in better engagement with the local community and increased awareness of the need for local resilience.
- It was noted that recent changes in the Senior Leadership Team had resulted in agreeing a new weekly rota for the role of Emergency Duty Officer which will enable the Council to respond to emergencies at short notice.
- Attention was drawn to the National Risk Register and the key risk of a national power outage which highlighted the need for resilience among local communities.

Responses to questions and discussion included the following points:

- The Portfolio Holder for Coast, Country and Environment thanked Officers and noted how well EDDC had responded to the localised flooding incident in May 2023 and emphasised the need for local communities to have plans in place to support themselves during such an event.
- Local community groups are key to resilience during emergencies and communities should be encouraged to start work on emergency planning if they had not already done so.
- It was noted that Devon Communities Together provided information and support for emergency planning.
- Local knowledge suggested that the localised flooding in May 2023 was exacerbated by water running off fields and lack of maintenance of drains and gullies which was previously undertaken by DCC.
- Better use of land management was discussed following the May 2023 flooding and should form part of the 'business as usual' phase following recovery from such an emergency.
- Good local knowledge would be crucial in managing an emergency such as a national power outage as it would be very difficult to hold detailed local information on residents' specific needs at District Council level.
- DCC operates an annual or tri-annual cycle of gully cleaning with an interactive map available on the DCC website showing the last time a gully was cleaned. Issues can be reported through the DCC website.

The Committee particularly noted the comments made with regard to the need for local community resilience groups and the concerns expressed regarding the importance of gully clearance. The Committee asked the Assistant Director Environmental Health to emphasise the need for gully clearance during communications with DCC.

It was agreed to ask the Emergency Planning Officer to come back to the Committee to respond to the concerns and issues raised.

It was agreed to note the Emergency Planning work undertaken in the year 2023 / 24.

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET

That the Council should encourage every community in East Devon to have a local emergency plan in place.

9 **Work programme**

It was noted that the Scrutiny Action Plan, which is in course of preparation, will inform much of the Committee's work programme for the rest of the civic year.

It was also noted, and agreed, that the Chair of the Overview Committee had requested early sight of the Service Plans, well in advance of the joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in January.

The work programme was agreed.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Chapman
M Goodman (Chair)
A Hall
M Hall
M Hartnell
J Heath
V Johns
D Mackinder (Vice-Chair)

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

A Bailey
B Bailey
R Collins
G Jung
M Rixson

Officers in attendance:

Matthew Blythe, Assistant Director Environmental Health
Tracy Hendren, Chief Executive
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (Deputy Monitoring Officer)
Andrew Wood, Director of Place (interim)
Paul Fealey, Horticultural Technical Officer
Julia Woodbridge, StreetScene Operations Manager

Councillor apologies:

I Barlow
J Brown
B Collins
O Davey
Y Levine
A Toye
J Whibley

Chairman

Date: