

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 10 July 2025

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.45 pm

1 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 January 2025 were agreed and signed as a true record.

2 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

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 or 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.

7 Annual complaint monitoring and service improvement report 2024/25

The Monitoring Officer presented the annual complaint monitoring and service improvement report for 2024/25.

It was noted that the increase in complaints year on year was consistent with national figures. It was no surprise that the highest number of complaints received related to planning and housing, and it should be borne in mind that improvements to the housing service were still on-going. It would, therefore, take some time to see a reduction in the number of housing complaints. Recent recruitment to fill staff shortages in the planning service was starting to prove beneficial with regard to reducing planning related complaints.

The Assistant Director for Housing (Regulatory Landlord Services Unit) advised that additional staff resource had been brought in to handle complaints and that the backlog

of complaints at the end of last year had now been cleared. Feedback from tenants showed that changes to the housing service were now having a positive impact.

The Monitoring Officer advised that the latest report from the Housing Ombudsman was expected later in July. The annual performance report from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for 2024/25 was available and showed of the three complaints investigated, that one was upheld and there was a 100% satisfactory remedy rate.

Discussion and responses to questions from Councillors included the following points:

- Regarding the Housing Action Plan referred to by the Assistant Director for Housing, it was agreed that this would be shared with the Housing Review Board;
- It would have assisted the Scrutiny Committee to have had the Action Plan included with the report to enable Councillors to see what was now being done differently from previous years when the same actions had been repeated year on year;
- It was noted that increased resources enabled problems to be addressed, which was preferable to encouraging residents to complain;
- The Committee would welcome more information on how the service was being proactive in preventing complaints being made in the first instance;
- Regarding staff vacancies, the Assistant Director advised that a permanent member of staff had now been recruited to the post of Housing Performance Lead and would start at the beginning of August;
- It was noted that a significant improvement had been made regarding anti-social behaviour complaints, following improvements as a result of an Ombudsman ruling in 2023;
- It was noted that the highest dissatisfaction related to housing repairs and all complaint learning was fed into operational meetings with contractors;
- A more detailed breakdown of the nature of complaints related to housing repairs would be helpful for Councillors, as the substance of complaints was variable;
- It was queried whether complaints related to the length of time taken to start repairs, or the quality of the repair itself;
- Regarding the checking of the quality of repairs, standard level repairs cannot be checked due to the volume undertaken. Higher value repairs and major works are monitored closely by EDDC surveyors during and after completion of the repairs;
- Regarding Councillors submitting enquiries on repairs, the Assistant Director advised that the Councillor enquiry form goes to the same officer each time for consistency of response;
- The Council could be more proactive when communicating with tenants in the same location when repairs or works are being carried out on houses of the same age. In response to this point, the Assistant Director advised that a whole house approach was preferable and that a report would be presented to the Housing Review Board regarding the holistic management of assets;
- It was queried whether there was a target for response times. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that the target for stage 1 complaints was 10 working days and for stage 2 complaints 20 working days;
- The Councillor enquiry form was not for members of the public. The public could engage with the Council in various other ways;
- Regarding penalties for the contractors undertaking repairs, there was provision for compensation where repairs were sub-standard;
- The Assistant Director advised that a software system for carrying out transactional surveys, which would allow for live feedback from tenants every time a repair was completed, had been considered last year but was too expensive. Other options were currently being considered;
- It was suggested that more information on context and scale of the complaints would be helpful for Councillors eg. What was the ratio of service requests to complaints;
- Concern was raised regarding the cost of tenants having to move out of their homes when repairs were being undertaken. It was noted that trying to find suitable alternative accommodation could be difficult and could add to the length of time for repairs to be

completed and to the cost of the repair. It was queried whether this was something which the Housing Review Board already scrutinised or not;

- There was discussion regarding whether the Scrutiny Committee could provide assistance to the Housing Review Board by way of a TaFF to scrutinise certain elements. Concern was expressed that the Scrutiny Committee should not interfere with the work of another committee. The feedback from the Peer Review supported the separation of the three scrutiny function committees. It was noted that the Housing Review Board could meet more than four times per year if required, but that was a decision for that committee.

It was agreed that the annual complaint monitoring and service improvement report for 2024/25 be noted.

8 Changes to Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief

The report noted that the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 30 January 2025 had considered a scoping report regarding the impact of reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief from inheritance tax. These had been announced by the UK Government at the Autumn Budget 2024. The proposed changes had proved to be particularly controversial with the farming community and had prompted a subsequent motion from Council on 4 December 2024.

The proposed scope of work focused on gathering evidence around the likely impact that the forthcoming changes would have on the District, particularly in relation to family farms. The report before the Committee provided an update on this activity following engagement with the National Farmers Union.

Discussion and questions from Councillors included the following points:

- Prior to 1997 all farms had to complete a census. This had recently been re-introduced to enable the Government to collect detailed information;
- The National Farmers Union only represented a proportion of farmers, with other organisations such as the Country Landowners Association also providing representation;
- The report made clear that the Council was not in a position to influence the Government, despite the Council's concern for the impact of the changes on farmers in the District;
- Even if the Committee had been able to obtain information on the impact of the changes on family farms in the District, the Council would still not be able to influence the Government's decision.

AGREED

It was agreed that the Committee noted the contents of the report and acknowledged the lack of granular level data through which to accurately measure the likely impact of the proposed changes in relation to inheritance liabilities for farming enterprises in the District.

It was further agreed to make the following recommendation to Council:

RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

RECOMMENDED THAT:

1. This issue is best addressed at a national level, taking a lead from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee report, and

2. There is continued support for the farming community in the District by pushing for improved consultation, the undertaking of a full impact assessment and consideration being given to both delaying the implementation of the reforms and to alternative proposals.

9 **Update on progress with the Scrutiny Action Plan**

The Democratic Services Manager had provided an update on progress with the Scrutiny Action Plan following the recommendations from the Scrutiny Review as follows:

Recommendation 1 – Review Terms of Reference of the three committees to ensure they operate in a complementary manner

Annual Council approved a change in membership to be 15 councillors on Overview Committee and Scrutiny Committee. HRB to be 15 made up of 8 councillors and 7 tenant/independent representatives.

As part of the review of the terms of reference, the Constitution Working Group was considering:

- Frequency of meetings – 4 per year
- Quorum – 4 councillors
- Terms of Reference would set out specific functions of each committee and a complementary listing shared by all 3 committees

Recommendations from Constitution Working Group will be presented to Council in October.

Recommendation 2 – Scrutiny Support

The three DSOs who support scrutiny have undergone training and are now providing support as part of their roles. Further development to follow.

Short term investment was no longer available in light of Local Government Reorganisation.

Supporting effective work programming and working up scoping documents is ongoing.

Recommendation 3 – Senior Officer Support

Director assigned to each committee

- Scrutiny Committee – Andy W/Melanie W
- Overview Committee – Simon Davey
- HRB – Catrin Stark

Directors were starting to hold meetings with Chairs

Recommendation 4 – Learning & Development

CfGS training session on work programming had been held in November 2024

Spotlight sessions had started and were taking place to brief committees on topics: recent sessions include planning enforcement and parking charges for motorhomes; a session on public conveniences would be held on 15 July

Recommendation 5 – Prioritising Work

A meeting was being arranged with Chair and Vice Chair of each committee to co-ordinate work programmes across the 3 committees

Recommendation 6 – Cross Party meetings

Cross party pre-meetings to be held as and when required (will depend on the items coming forward to committees)

Recommendation 7 – Development Support

Officer training to be made available in September to give officers an understanding of the role of the 3 overview and scrutiny committees

Recommendation 8 – Having an impact

Work is under way to identify how recommendations from overview and scrutiny are tracked

Publicity from overview and scrutiny reviews would be put out through social media, recent example being the outcome from the Coach Tourism TAFF.

Follow up:

It was noted that currently there is no process in place to agree whether a pre-meeting should be held before a Committee meeting and when this should take place. The Democratic Services Officer would follow this up with the Democratic Services Manager.

The update was noted.

10 Work programme

During the discussion on the work programme, the Monitoring Officer advised that recent work had been undertaken to ensure that when proposals were brought forward, they were supported by officer advice and information so as to make any subsequent scrutiny work meaningful and effective.

The following items for the work programme were discussed and agreed:

- To request that the latest report on consultancy and agency spend is brought to the October meeting;
- Scoping document on the impacts of the previous ban on the use of glyphosates requested for the September meeting, with a view to receiving a report in October;
- Request that the Deputy Monitoring Officer takes the item on Devon County Council's responses to planning applications back to the Strategic Planning Committee.

Subject to the above items, the work programme was agreed.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

I Barlow
K Blakey
J Brown
B Collins
M Goodman (Chair)
V Johns
Y Levine
D Mackinder (Vice-Chair)

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

C Brown
R Collins

Officers in attendance:

Tracy Hendren, Chief Executive
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Andrew King, Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services)
Melanie Wellman, Director of Governance (Monitoring Officer)

Councillor apologies:

M Chapman
O Davey
A Hall
M Hall

Chair

Date: