

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 15 November 2018

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00pm and ended at 8.12pm.

***17 Public speaking**

There were no public speakers at the meeting.

***18 Minute confirmation**

The minutes of the Overview Committee held on the 27 September 2018, were confirmed as a true record.

***19 Declarations of interest**

No declarations were made at the meeting.

20 Transformation Strategy and Financial Plan 2019 - 2029

The Chairman welcomed the Strategic Lead Transformation and Organisational Development, the Strategic Lead Finance, and the Portfolio Holder Finance to the meeting.

The Transformation Strategy approach has been to maintain a viable workforce, moving away from traditional approaches to budget reductions, to innovation and generation of income. The refresh of the strategy introduced two changes to the strategic themes of the approach, now including **digital by design** and **fit for purpose**. Each of the seven themes were explained to the committee, with some illustrative examples.

The transformation strategy has delivered the framework for a debate on efficiency costs and increasing income, which is now embedded in the culture of officers. It was key now to continue to deliver messages to residents on how the Council is funded in this way.

The Strategic Lead – Finance highlighted from his report the following key areas:

- The current position showed a shortfall of £1,952,088 for 2020/21. This was based on a no growth budget, with no additional requests;
- Assumption that the £5 increase in council tax will remain in place for 2019/20 with an inflation increase applied for future years;
- Business rate income has been assumed under the existing scheme of 50% retention;
- New Homes Bonus (NHB) has been maintained at a level of £1.5m. The scheme is expected to continue for 2019/20, with an estimated income of £3.6m in total, with the balance being used for capital projects.

The committee were taken through the Medium Term Financial Plan in detail, and how the innovations brought through the Transformation Strategy had helped over previous years, and continued to deliver for future years, to provide additional income and savings. There was still further work to be undertaken to deliver enough to produce a balanced budget for future years.

In discussing the MTFP and the projects set out in the Transformation Strategy Monitor, the committee raised the following issues:

- Clarification on the decrease and cease of the rate support grant – Members were reminded of the three year settlement, which ends in 2019/20;

- Concern raised by Councillor Allen on the staffing levels for economic development being reduced when there was a demand to increase those skill sets to help deliver more economic development, as well as a need to increase commercial skills as the Council looks to increase income from commercial assets. The Strategic Lead Finance confirmed that the savings identified at an operational level with posts did not affect the objectives of seeking efficiencies. The agreed additional resource to help deliver economic development previously was still retained in the draft budget for 2019/20. The Strategic Lead Transformation and Organisational Development outlined the vacancy management process currently in place, and the work already underway in examining the workforce as a whole. Once the new Councils priorities were known after the May election, a report would come forward with recommendation on changes to the workforce for delivering those priorities;
- Care in monitoring the details of expenditure as well as the larger budgets – the Strategic Lead Finance assured the committee that all detail is scrutinised, and that full detail is published in the Budget Book on each service;
- Street trading licence income changes, now confirmed by the Chairman of Licensing and Enforcement Committee as back in place and looking to increase for future years, following a suspension of charges whilst a number of issues were resolved;
- The “Ocean” in response to a question was clarified as a separate company from the Council and therefore any loss would be the liability of LED;
- Spend for “fit for purpose” was an operational spend to cover redundancy costs that would bring about savings in future years;
- Important to implement the strategy to help protect front line services.

The Vice Chairman welcomed the approach of the Transformation Strategy, in looking to continue to improve efficiencies of the Council, including increasing the skills matrix of staff so that they had the flexibility to meet demands as they changed over coming years.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Leads for their clarity on explaining the financial pressures on the authority.

RECOMMENDED to Council:

To approve the Transformation Strategy and Financial Plan 2019 – 2029 and note the Overview Committee’s specific support for the Transformation Strategy looking to protect the delivery of front line services.

RESOLVED:

To receive an update at a future meeting with an outline of plans for delivering a “fit for purpose” structure for the Council.

21 Digital Strategy

The Strategic Lead Transformation and Organisational Development presented the draft Digital Strategy for debate by the committee. Many elements set out in the Strategy were already in place or underway – the strategy sought to define a clear intention of digital by design.

Attention was drawn specifically to:

- The increasing number of transactions online and continued demand for such transactions to not only be available, but simple and straightforward to use;

- Changing the platform used to enable each customer to log into their own portal and choose to transact with the Council across a whole range of services;
- Improvements to the East Devon mobile app;
- Applying the GDS government principles to all transactions – for example delivering a service that works as effectively as applying for car road tax or passport renewal;
- Improvements to technology does not detract from the human interaction that is still required and continues to be provided across services.

During debate, the committee raised issues including:

- Concern that vulnerable, elderly and the blind or partially sighted could be disadvantaged by the increasing demand to transact online. In response, the committee were reminded that all services were acutely aware of the need to continue to serve customers in the way that suited the customer. A Member gave an example of undertaking a transaction online with the help of a customer service advisor at Exmouth Town Hall;
- Investigate the process used by East Anglia in transacting permitted development applications online;
- In response to a question, the committee were informed of the work of the web editors across the services and the use of clear guidelines to ensure uniformity of message and style. The communications team also oversee the content as a whole to ensure that the site is relevant and clear to understand;
- Most searches were undertaken by the public from a search engine such as Google rather than drilling down through the site itself.

The Vice Chairman commented that the continued improvement to online transactions empowered the public to help themselves during their busy lives. He also welcomed that the need for human interaction was still, and will continue to be, available to those who needed it.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet:

That the Digital Strategy be recommended to Council for approval, for reason of continuing to improve how customers transact with the Council, whilst maintaining the availability of human interaction for vulnerable groups and other sectors of the community that require help.

RESOLVED

That the Overview Committee receive an update on progress of implementation at a future meeting.

***22 Viewpoint Survey**

The Portfolio Holder Corporate for Corporate Services presented the findings from the latest Viewpoint Survey. The committee watched a short video on the key messages from the findings. The Portfolio Holder felt that using more visual means of communicating key messages was much more effective, and could be shared across multiple media platforms. This method of communication could be utilised for a number of issues, including the Council Plan.

The media format provided a means of informing and educating the public in a digestible way.

Comments from the committee included:

- The video shown could be refined further to include infographics and made shorter, in order to increase the number of people who would watch it;
- The format could be applied to other areas of the council, such as promoting what services are available to local businesses to aid them. The Communications Team had already assisted with the production of a business magazine;
- Messages communicated to the public must also acknowledge that not all the Council's customers are satisfied, and what actions are being taken to try to resolve those issues;
- The format would be applied to the next Council Plan, which will be drafted after the next election in May. An example of good practice of communicating a Council Plan could be found on the website of South Norfolk Council;
- The software used to create the video is available online. A suggestion was made that such software could be utilised locally for communicating neighbourhood plan key messages.

RESOLVED

that the Overview Committee endorses the format of communicating the results of the Viewpoint Survey and asks that comments made are taken into account as the format is developed and refined.

***23 Overview Forward Plan**

The Chairman outlined forthcoming work for the committee. Requests were made to timetable in work on business development, specifically small businesses in food who want to expand, and the impact of Brexit on their ability to export.

Attendance list

Councillors Present:

Graham Godbeer (Chairman)
Ian Hall
Mark Williamson
Peter Faithfull
Mike Allen
Mark Evans Martin
Steve Hall
Rob Longhurst
Tim Dumper
Geoff Pratt

Councillors Also Present:

Dean Barrow
Alan Dent
Brian Bailey

Officers

Karen Jenkins, Strategic Lead Transformation and Organisational Development
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor Apologies:

Douglas Hull
Andrew Moulding
Jill Elson
Pauline Stott

Chairman

Date.....