

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Overview Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 25 July 2019

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.31 pm

9 Public Speaking

John Gregory, Labour Party member in Honiton on behalf of Honiton and Axe Vale Labour Party read out the following statement, in relation to minute 17.

“I am commenting on behalf of Honiton and Axe Valley Labour Party on the scoping of the district council’s Vitality of High Streets report and recommendations.

Labour is here today to speak up for Axminster, Honiton, Seaton, Colyton and Beer town centres. All are bursting with desire to capitalise on their unique heritage, beauty, character and amenity. We note the district council has as yet achieved none of its 2008 aspirations for the mixed-use development potential of Webster's Garage in Axminster, or Honiton’s Ottery Moor Lane, Cattle Market, Bradford Builders Yard and Chapel Street.

Town centres should be buzzing destinations, with facilities, shops, amenities, health, culture, education and wellbeing backed by excellent physical and service-based infrastructure. Employment should be place-based. Neither community wellbeing nor environment are served by turning our towns into commuter dormitories for “Greater Exeter”.

The report should take note of the recommendations of the House of Commons cross party report on "High streets and town centres in 2030", which echoes Labour’s 5 point plan to rebuild our high streets:

- Ban ATM charges and stop bank branch and Post Office closures.
- Improve local bus services and provide free bus travel for under 25s.
- Deliver free public Wi-Fi in our town centres.
- Establish a register of landlords of empty shops.
- and bring the business rates system into the 21st century.

In a rural area with underfunded public transport options, it makes no sense to rule out looking at car parking solutions, as is proposed in the scoping statement. The innovative town of Frome in Somerset has successfully provided 700 free car parking spaces within 4-13 minutes’ walk of the town centre.

Our towns should be "destinations", with creatively packaged "happenings" integrating our creative, artisan and agricultural heritage with our history. Speciality markets can be packaged as a cultural experience, supported by erection of Cullompton-style high quality gazebos at rates affordable to small traders. Publicity campaigns, tourist information, signposts and a properly funded, vibrant website and social media offering should be facilitated by the district for each town, and that link up with surrounding villages, and each other, into a coherent trail.

Labour recommends the district funds and develops best practice with visionary organisations like Light Up Axminster, that have fostered a culture of trust and

community engagement and are incubators for the ideas that will transform our town centres.”

Anna Day Lewis, Labour Party member in Colyton on behalf of Honiton and Axe Vale Labour Party, read out the following statement.

“I am commenting on behalf of Honiton and Axe Valley Labour Party on the district council response to the Fire and Rescue Service consultation.

Colyton is Britain’s oldest fire station, dating from 1681. Even our medieval ancestors were more visionary than this present government, prudently importing the latest in fire-fighting technology for the benefit of the community, with an appropriate sense of humanity.

The Labour Party opposes both the closure of Colyton Fire Station and the downgrading of Honiton Fire Station. All the fire stations at the eastern end of the district are already run on an on-call basis, and even now there are no wholtime fire station services between Exmouth and Dorchester.

The figures used to justify the closures are bewildering. Why is present performance based on 80% staffing availability, but outcomes of the closures based on 100% staffing? How can the response times from other stations to meet Colyton’s needs be justified?

Just this week fire-fighters have released a trapped child in Honiton, but helping people in trouble is excluded from the consultation’s figures. So are the first responder services the fire service undertakes on behalf of the defunded ambulance service, the frontline support it provides to the police, and the public fire and safety training.

When the Clarence Hotel burned down in Exeter almost every engine across Devon responded, but how many stations were given credit for their response? Just one response was included in these official statistics being used to justify more cuts. And with all those engines engaged in Exeter, which station was meanwhile supporting the safety of our residents? You guessed it - Colyton Fire Station.

Just today Colyton was on standby, covering a farm fire near Bridport, but will they be given credit in the official figures? No.

Independent analysis shows that over 600,000 people annually face increased risk of death by fire under any of the current proposals. With significant population growth built into our local plans, the problem can only become worse. The population of Colyton is elderly, and statistically more vulnerable to fire, and I’m afraid to say apt to nod off with something on the stove.

Firefighters routinely give many hours over and above what they are contracted to provide, and are subsidising the service with their goodwill in spite of ongoing cuts to real wages and benefits. We can’t afford to lose the goodwill of the real people providing public services at the heart of our communities.

These cuts are not penny wise and they are pound foolish. Labour calls upon the district council to strongly oppose all of the options in the consultation, and to call for the fire station in Colyton, and the two pumps in Honiton, to be retained and properly maintained for the benefit of our district.”

10 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on the 27 June 2019 were confirmed as a true record.

11 **Declarations of interest**

Minute 17. Vitality of High Streets and Town Centres scope.
Councillor Marcus Hartnell, Personal: Shopkeeper in Seaton.

Councillor Ian Hall, Personal: Devon County Councillor for Axminster Division.

12 **Matters of urgency**

There were no matters of urgency.

13 **Confidential/exempt item(s)**

There were no items classified in this way.

14 **Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service Changes consultation**

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service proposed changes were under consultation. The committee had the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes, whilst maintaining the ability for individual councillors to respond in their own right.

The reasons for the proposed change in service delivery related to changing risks over time, and the need to make significant financial savings.

The consultation offered six options for change, covering aspects such as station closures and how stations were crewed. Each of the six options in the consultation included the closure of two fire stations in the District: Colyton and Budleigh Salterton.

Ward Members for Colyton, Councillors Paul Arnott and Helen Parr spoke about the impact the proposed Colyton station closure would have over a much wider area than the town itself. Councillor Arnott recommended responding against all the options listed in the consultation, as it did clash with the Council's own policy for strategic development, including the expansion of the number of homes in Axminster, Seaton and Colyton.

Councillor Parr told the committee that local people had not been reassured by the public events held by the Fire Service. She challenged the data presented in the consultation and had asked for more financial detail. She felt that the proposals impacted more significantly on the District than for any other area in Devon and Somerset. She was not convinced that any of the options proposed would ensure the safety of people in the District.

Members of the committee had considered the consultation document, with some members attending a local public event held by the Fire Service. Concerns were raised on the proposed changes, including:

- What could be done locally to encourage local employers to release employees for service, such as working with local Chambers of Commerce;

- Impact of local road infrastructure in travel time to attend any incident, particularly for rural areas;
- Proposals were not “rural proved” and the Fire Service should be asked to demonstrate that they have taken the factors of rural locations into account, including the road networks and the type of buildings and materials that have a higher risk of faster burn times (for example thatched roofing and farming stock bedding and feed);
- Fire fighters are also first responders; reducing that number impacts on delivering for medical calls and the partnership arrangements with the Health Service; as well as impacting on policing duties that they also get involved with. There was no detail in the consultation on how that would be mitigated;
- There was no information in the consultation on how the funding arrangement for the area compares nationally, therefore there was no way to ascertain if the funding was fair;
- Not enough breakdown to compare rural and town data, or data for local area to compare with national data quoted in the consultation;
- Recent examples given of incidents that may not have had a positive outcome if the proposals are implemented – one such example being a fire at Seaton impacting on 17 residents;
- Whilst many residents and tourists were better educated on fire risks, dementia was growing in the area which could lead to an increased risk;
- Financial savings appeared to be the main driver for reform and other means of bridging this gap needed to be considered;
- Details of response times for rural incidents needed to be understood, as impacted both by access and speed of response from nearest station;
- What assessment had been made of the effectiveness of fire prevention work.

The conclusion from the debate was that there was insufficient information in the consultation for the committee to make any form of recommendation to be submitted either directly to the Fire Service, or to Cabinet and Council for a response to the consultation.

RESOLVED:

1. that the Overview Committee Chairman, working with the Leader of the Council, writes to the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service asking for more information as debated in the committee meeting; requesting a response to come to the 29 August 2019 meeting;
2. that the response be debated at the 29 August 2019 committee meeting to recommend to Cabinet for their 4 September 2019 meeting to Council in order to meet the deadline of the consultation.

Review of the Council's Governance Arrangements

At their meeting of 10 July, Cabinet resolved to instruct the Overview Committee to carry out a review of the Councils governance arrangements and options for change, and report back on its findings. The Portfolio Holder for Transformation was also instructed to establish a Think Tank for the purpose of investigating the options for change.

The Chairman outlined the need for the committee to scope the project, and focus on why the change was sought. This work would then lead to weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the models of governance available.

Members of the committee and other councillors present put forward their views, including:

- Councils with no overall control tend to have a Cabinet system and offer intense briefing to all councillors;
- The culture of the council and the officer roles need to be examined as part of the process, including how staffing levels are determined;
- Hybrid forms of models had been put in place in other authorities and should be examined;
- No effective scrutiny function was currently in place, referenced by several councillors giving examples of previous work undertaken. Scrutiny had been done of external bodies who were not obliged to take action on any recommendations made; but little of value of the work of the Cabinet;
- More effective scrutiny in current Cabinet model could mean that no change of model is required;
- Set up a shadow cabinet to closely follow the work of the Portfolio Holders;
- Need to draw up scope and progress the work to look to have a new model in place from May 2020;
- Report directly to Council with findings;
- Time was needed for newly elected councillors to understand the processes of the current system and therefore any review of changing the model should wait until after May 2020;
- Weighing up better engagement of a committee model against quicker decision process of Cabinet model;
- Need to have a decision process that can act swiftly on financial decision, for example under Commercial Investment strategy;
- Time and money impact of visiting other authorities to seek evidence;
- Public have asked for change, evidenced by the outcome of the May 2019 election;
- Members feel excluded and unable to influence decisions - Cabinet decisions seem agreed before discussion at Cabinet meetings;
- Need to gather evidence and option, including on what decisions had already been made;
- Strong leadership is key for any governance model;
- Seek examples of authorities that have reverted back to a committee system;
- LGiU document "Changing to a new committee system in a new era" was recommended to the committee.

The Portfolio Holder for Transformation welcomed any views from councillors, including those that had experience of both committee and Cabinet models. He would be operating a think tank on a neutral approach, looking to build and evidence base to recommend a model before the next Annual Council. He would look to provide an update report on his work at the next meeting of the committee.

Advice to the committee from the Strategic Lead for Governance and Licensing was to take the necessary time to firstly establish the purpose of change, and then fully evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of governance models, which realistically may not be

possible to then deliver a change in governance by May 2020. Further work could be undertaken by the committee at their 29 August meeting, and if required, an additional meeting could be called if required by the Chairman to add to the scheduled dates.

In response to concern about some overlap or duplication of work with both Overview Committee and a Think Tank considering the same issue, the Chairman commented that there would be a balance between the two. The Overview Committee may reach a different conclusion to that of the Portfolio Holder for Transformation, but both would be put forward. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the intention was not to duplicate, but to compliment each other. Ultimately, he commented, the model was about democracy, and if a new model would be more democratic whilst still delivering decisions at a speed felt acceptable.

The Chairman concluded the debate for that meeting, summing up that it was a positive step to evaluate how decisions were made. There was also a need to address the public concern about a lack of openness and transparency. He also recommended a document by the LGA and the Centre for Public Scrutiny entitled "Rethinking governance: Practical steps for councils considering changes to their governance arrangements". The issue would be debated further at the next meeting of the committee.

RESOLVED:

1. That the request from Cabinet to carry out a review of the Councils governance arrangements and options for change, and report back on its findings, be accepted;
2. That at the 29 August 2019 meeting, Members put forward and agree the reasons for change to the current governance arrangements and the objectives for the Council's governance arrangements going forward;
3. That at the 29 August 2019 meeting, Members consider, discuss and agree the method and process to be followed for undertaking a review of options;
4. That additional meetings of the committee be considered specifically to debate this item.

16

Income generation including broadband scope

The committee discussed completion of the scope of the work relating to income generation, specifically investigating the possibility of the Council providing broadband.

The Chairman updated the committee on previous work undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee in hearing from a solution for Talaton Parish Council provided by a wireless solution company Voenus; and the work by the Connect Devon and Somerset project, whereby Gigaclear were under contract for delivery of the second phase of broadband provision.

The committee discussed the shortcomings of the delivery of Gigaclear and the other options that were available to bridge the gap in delivery. There were also concerns about the levels of service for 4G varying widely across the District.

Comments were made that it was unlikely to be an income generation of any scale for the authority if it commissioned another provider to deliver to areas still short of the high speed broadband required. The issue may be better considered not as an income generation possibility, but a duty of care to the local community to help deliver it. The Council could consider if it had any suitable assets that masts could be attached to, as other authorities had already undertaken, and charge a fee for that service.

The Chairman agreed that the best way forward was to form a smaller group of Councillors to work out the detail to the scope and report back to the committee on how to progress. Volunteers to assist him were Councillors Hall, Rixson and King.

RESOLVED that the Chairman work with a small group of councillors to discuss and complete the scope for reporting back to the Overview Committee at a future meeting.

17 **Vitality of High Streets and Town Centres scope**

The committee discussed the completion of the scope of work relating to the decline in recent years of high streets in the District, and how such a review could assist the latest high street yet to be built at Cranbrook.

The scope would be amended to include specific reference to developing the high street at Cranbrook, and encourage investment in the District's towns.

Members felt it was key to compare how high streets had changed from the previous Forum held in 2012 on the same issue, and it was important to talk to the retailers themselves for their views. Cllr Allen had provided the Chairman with a number of suggestions for the evidence base.

The committee were advised of the basis of a Forum, which can include councillors that are not on the Overview Committee.

Cllr Marcus Hartnell volunteered to act as Chairman for the Forum, with volunteers from the committee Councillors De Saram, Rixson, and Hawkins. Councillor Moulding also volunteered. The Chairman agreed that further volunteers could be sought from outside the committee.

RESOLVED

1. That a request for volunteers for the Forum on the Vitality of High Streets and Town Centres is issued;
2. That Councillor Hartnell chairs the Forum and regularly reports progress to the Overview Committee.

18 **Overview Forward Plan**

The forward plan would be updated to reflect agreed requests from Council the previous evening, including the item "Poverty, homelessness, human rights and health and wellbeing in East Devon" which would be taken at the August meeting.

In light of government changes, the Chairman did not expect the Select Committee reports to be published soon and therefore removed them from the scheduled meeting.

The committee were advised to prepare for the September joint meeting with the Scrutiny committee by reviewing the current service plans. The committee preferred a start time of 10am for the all day meeting. Cllr Allen requested a follow up on a recommendation from January 2019, agreed by Council, that stated that "any amendments to make objectives more SMART following a review by Strategic Lead – Organisational Development and Transformation together with the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees"

The forward plan was noted.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

N Hookway (Chairman)
V Johns (Vice-Chairman)
M Allen
S Chamberlain
B De Saram
I Hall
M Hartnell
S Hawkins
F King
M Rixson
T Woodward

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
J Bailey
K Bloxham
S Bond
P Hayward
B Ingham
S Jackson
D Ledger

Officers in attendance:

Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead Governance and Licensing
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor apologies:

J Loudoun
C Wright

Chairman

Date: