

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Committee held at On line via the Zoom App on 21 May 2020. All Councillors and registered speakers will have been sent an appointment with the meeting link.

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.00 pm

70 Public speaking

There were no members of the public who wished to speak.

71 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2020 were agreed and signed as a true record.

Members noted that the recommendation to Council on the Queens Drive Development Project call-in would be considered at the next available meeting of Cabinet.

72 Declarations of interest

Councillor Iain Chubb, Minute 8, Member of Devon County Council
Councillor Eleanor Rylance, Minute 8, received a Government Grant for her holiday let business.

Councillor Vicky Johns, Minute 8, Member of Ottery St Mary Volunteer Group
Councillor Tony McCollum, Minute 8. Member of Honiton Volunteer Group
Councillor Val Ranger, Minute 8, Volunteer Shielder

73 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

74 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential/exempt items.

75 Decisions made by Cabinet called in by Members for scrutiny in accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules

There were no items called in.

76 Update on the COVID-19 response by East Devon District Council

Members received a verbal update on the COVID-19 response by the Chief Executive, Mark Williams, Topics of specific interest covered included aspects of housing, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the process of obtaining food parcels, and need for Food Bank support, and other COVID-19 related matters such as staffing issues, and future finances, since the impact of residents, businesses and the Council as a whole has been significant.

Mark Williams reported that there had been three key areas for Local Government.

1. Supporting adult care – this was led by Devon County Council.
2. Supporting the economy.
3. Impact of lockdown and the Council.

With regard to the economy, Mark Williams reported that COVID-19 had a big impact on the local economy. From April there had been a substantial increase in Universal Credit claims. The Council was also the advocate for a grant scheme introduced by the Government to support small and medium sized businesses. There had been a fund of £50M and this had been distributed with help from the Revenues and Benefits and Economy teams.

The vast majority of businesses had been pleased to get the money quickly and 87% of all the money allocated to East Devon had been distributed. It was hoped to be able to run down the scheme by the end of May. However, there had been feedback from a number of businesses that had not benefited from the scheme. The government had responded with a new discretionary scheme to be implemented by the Council, that had a fund of £2.5M, grants to individual business were likely to be significantly lower than the first round of grants. Although grants were discretionary, the Council would contact businesses to inform them of the availability of this grant aid.

With regard to protecting the vulnerable the initial priority was to protect those who were thought to be particularly vulnerable. This was a national scheme provided through the NHS and unitary authorities. It was acknowledged that the quality of data on those who needed to be shielded provided by the government had been particularly poor.

With regard to those who had were less vulnerable. The Council had been asked to set up a Community Hub and to act as facilitator and provide guidance for community effort. Some staff had been re-allocated to form a team of 'hubsters'. They had received 40-50 calls a day requesting advice and help. This had been reasonably successful, helped by the low infection rate to date in Devon & Cornwall. There had also been a number of other grant schemes set up, including, the Foodbank fund and a COVID hardship fund.

It was hoped to be able to keep the Community Hub going and there had been central government funding for this purpose. So far central government had provided £1.5M of funding to EDDC. There was lobbying of central government to provide further funding. If central government funding had not been provided then there would be a number of local authorities that would struggle to provide services to their communities. The work of the Housing Team had included housing the homeless and all homeless people in East Devon had been provided with accommodation.

Karen Simpkin, Strategic Lead – Organisational Development & Transformation reported on the information dashboard developed with Strata. This was operational and a report on the number of telephone calls received had been provided. However, there would be a need for further licences to be provided for other users to access. Many of the calls received had been regarding prescriptions and shopping.

With regard to lockdown and the impact on the Council. Exmouth Town Hall had closed, but Blackdown House had been kept open for staff albeit closed to the public, as had Streetscene depots. But a large percentage of Council staff had been able to work from home. Staff sickness had improved immeasurably. The current sickness target was an average of 8.5 days and for 2019/2020 the final figures showed an average 8.6 days per person. In April 2020, the first month of the year the outturn sickness figure was 0.46 average days. This may be the consequence of staff adjusting to the new working from

home. It was also noted that managers had been tasked with keeping in touch with their staff.

Karen Simpkin, Strategic Lead Organisational Development & Transformation reported that HR had stepped up the level of communications. Worksmart principles had been amended to allow staff to work from Blackdown House where they want to and social distancing requirements and use of the office would be closely monitored. But the new 'normal' would be working from home until further notice.

During discussions the following questions or points were noted:

- Air BnB's were eligible to apply for grant aid, provided they paid business rates and this made a substantial number of second homes in East Devon able to apply for grant aid.
- There had been 3,369 grants made to small and medium sized businesses so far.
- Importance of ensuring that there was clarity between the national support scheme and ours and that people had the appropriate support.
- The demand for foodbanks was increasing, particularly for young families and this would be likely to continue in future months as the furlough scheme was wound down and the economic effects of the pandemic was felt.
- The Community Hub had helped voluntary groups in the district, enabled different groups to connect with each other and helped to sustain and reinforce the need for key workers.
- How many conversations had been held with local MP's and how was their understanding of the District Council's financial crisis? Mark Williams, Chief Executive reported that he had weekly calls and regular contact with MP's Neil Parrish and Simon Jupp and they were well acquainted with the acute need for the Council to continue to deliver services. There had been a consistent message to both MP's who had been effective in lobbying the government to provide additional funding for EDDC.
- The District Council had been the facilitator for further discussion ensuring that community groups worked together to assist the voluntary response.
- Importance of finding a way of providing feedback from our hub so we have a clear picture of what was going on.
- How was EDDC going to support families at a time of crisis? This raised an issue of EDDC's ability to deal with wider societal issues.
- Reopening of schools in East Devon would be done on a voluntary basis, decided by the schools governors.
- Language Schools had not so far been able to qualify for business rate relief. Libby Jarrett, Service Lead – Revenues & Benefits would look into this.
- There had been a substantial increase in Universal Credit applications in East Devon from 3793 in February to 6779 in April.
- Committee members wanted to send a message to all staff thanking them for their efforts in adapting to the new working environment.
- Working with Devon County Council and other partners in the Community Hub had been very good with weekly meetings held.
- Devon had been a voluntary area for the local outreach plan and was waiting to hear if it had been accepted for test, trace and contact.
- Contact with care homes in the district would be through Devon County Council, with EDDC helping where it was asked.

RESOLVED that the Council lobby the government on the following issues –

1. So that future grant schemes do not include second homes.

2. To devolve the response and funding required for dealing with the current public health crisis to the lowest appropriate tier of government.

77 **Update on the Car Parking Task & Finish Forum (TAFF)**

Members noted that the Car Parking TAFF had met on four occasions prior to lockdown and agreed its Terms of Reference at the first meeting on 7 November 2019, when an approach was adopted to consider issues in each of the main towns of the District before proceeding further.

Links had been provided in the agenda to previous meetings so members could view progress to date and consider the original Terms of Reference and priority themes in the context of the more recently agreed climate emergency action plan. Members considered whether a different approach was now required for the future, given the Council's commitment to climate change and the way in which EDDC car parking policy could influence future driver behaviour and potentially fund projects such as delivering electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

It was noted that following the anticipated appointment of a new Leader and Cabinet at forthcoming Council meetings; the membership of the TAFF would need to be amended and so further consideration of car parking issues should wait until the appointment of the new TAFF membership.

Councillor Maddy Chapman reported her concerns about a potential influx of campers and caravans to the district. Officers reported that they were well aware of this issue and that government guidance was that people travelling should not stay overnight. This would be enforced in the district where appropriate.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

T McCollum (Vice-Chairman)
V Ranger
E Rylance
M Chapman
I Chubb
B De Saram
C Gardner (Chairman)
A Colman
V Johns

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

M Armstrong
P Arnott
J Bailey
S Bond
P Hayward
N Hookway
G Jung
D Ledger
A Moulding
H Parr

G Pook
M Rixson
E Wragg
O Davey
A Dent
P Faithfull
M Howe
S Jackson
F King
K Simpkin

Officers in attendance:

Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead Governance and Licensing
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Christopher Lane, Democratic Services Officer
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (and Deputy Monitoring Officer)
Mark Williams, Chief Executive
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits
Giles Salter, Solicitor

Councillor apologies:

C Brown
K Bloxham
K McLauchlan
J Rowland
P Jarvis

Chairman

Date: