

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 11 July 2007

Present:

Councillors:

A R Giles (Chairman)
G P Chamberlain (Vice Chairman)

Mrs C E Drew
Ms V Duval Steer
S C Luxton
Mrs F I Newth

P J Skinner
G M Troman
Mrs E E Wragg

Also Present

Councillors:

Miss V Ash
T A Cope
P A Diviani
Miss J M Elson
C Gibbings
S Hughes
J A Knight

Mrs A E Liverton
A T Moulding
Miss S M Randall Johnson
A W J Reed
Mrs P A Stott
C Tratt
S C Wragg

Apologies:

Councillors:

D Chapman
G Godbeer
H J Jeffery
K D Nicholas
B Nicholson
Mrs M A Rogers

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.10pm

*10 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 13 June 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

*11 Performance indicators

A) BV218a & BV218b Abandoned vehicles investigation and removal

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Street Scene Services on Performance Indicators BV218a and BV218b, relating to dealing with abandoned vehicles.

It was noted that East Devon received notification of approximately 350 vehicles a year reported as abandoned, which, upon investigation, 90 of these were actually abandoned and removed at a cost of £55 per vehicle. This was a relatively low number compared with other local authorities; Torbay had 10 times the number of reported abandoned vehicles. East Devon dealt with 100% of its reported abandoned vehicles. Members acknowledged the recent survey, which showed that a high percentage of the population were satisfied with the way the District Council dealt with abandoned vehicles and that they did not consider this to be a high priority.

***11 Performance indicators (Cont)**

The Head of Street Scene Services confirmed that he was looking at ways to improve performance. However, the problem of abandoned cars was less of an issue as the price of scrap metal was high at the moment and scrap metal dealers would pay for end of life and abandoned vehicles. Investigations to determine if a vehicle was abandoned included contacting the Police and DVLA. It was confirmed that there was a duty to remove abandoned vehicles from private land.

Members considered that the Head of Street Scene Services should seek to foster better and quicker information provision from both the DVLA and Police.

B) BV212 Average time to relet Local Authority Housing

(Councillor Mrs A E Liverton, chairman of the Housing Review Board, joined the Committee for the item)

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing & Social Inclusion on Performance Indicator BV212, which measured the average time to relet Local Authority Housing. He acknowledged the very disappointing figures for reletting the District Council's vacant housing stock and confirmed he was introducing a number of measures to improve performance as outlined in the report. As a result, the figures for relet times had already improved

The poor figures were due in part to the high proportion of sheltered housing in the District, which could be difficult to let. The demand was for family houses and accommodation for single people. A variety of actions were needed to deal with the issue of hard to let sheltered properties in the District which could include decommissioning.

Members noted that if there was a significant delay, a tenant could be offered suitable alternative accommodation. A choice based lettings scheme was being introduced, which it was hoped would reduce the number of refusals of offers of accommodation. Available properties would be advertised in the local press for expressions of interest from suitable applicants. The need to ensure that the most vulnerable families got the opportunity to bid was emphasised.

RESOLVED

1. that the Head of Housing & Social Inclusion be thanked for acknowledging the need to improve this BVPI;
2. that concern be expressed over the weakness in past performance in this area and it be noted that the Housing Review Board was monitoring the situation, was seeking to improve performance and endorsed the concerns and action being taken.

***12 General user satisfaction survey**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director – Central Services on the key findings of the General Survey that applied to external communications and the key questions for the Council. The Portfolio Holder for Communications, Councillor Stuart Hughes, introduced the subject, and the Corporate Director – Central Services also gave a presentation on “Improving Communication”.

During discussion the following points were made:

- The website was the key tool for the Customer Service Centre and provided a service to the public, which was cheap and effective;
- Communications with Ward Members on what was happening in their Ward was an important issue. This had been discussed at Corporate Management Team and steps were being taken to ensure officers were more aware of the issue and what action to take;

*12 **General user satisfaction survey (Cont)**

- That the Communication Officers did his best to issue copies of press statements to the appropriate Ward Members;
- Many of the older residents in East Devon did not have access to a computer;
- Concern that some sections of the Council, particularly those under pressure, did not respond as quickly as Members would like to their letters and telephone messages;
- Many residents in East Devon were only interested in their own locality;
- The need for good communications with the residents of East Devon;
- A problem for East Devon District Council arising from the Survey was how the council could communicate and engage with the one third of residents who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied;
- The need to involve Ward Members in activities in their Ward.

Members recognised that all of the Communication Task and Finish Forum recommendations had been incorporated in the action plan.

- RESOLVED**
1. that the conclusions of the General User Satisfaction Survey and proposed Action Plan be endorsed;
 2. that the Communications Portfolio Holder be asked to assess whether an annual General User Satisfaction Survey should be undertaken.

*13 **Quarterly monitoring of Service Plans – fourth quarter 2006/07**

Consideration was given to the report of the Policy Manager with regard to performance information for the period 1 January to 30 March 2007.

Members raised questions over a number of the Service Plans. A question was asked in particular over IT difficulties experienced with the delivery of remote working methods for Building Control Surveyors.

Concern was also expressed over printing and photocopying costs. The Chief Executive explained the background to the existing Rank Xerox contract. A first class service was being provided, but due to the terms of the contract, costs needed to be reduced and it was anticipated that this could be achieved when the contract was retendered in September.

The mentoring programme, whereby a Corporate Director or Head of Service, looked after a member of their staff had not yet been started, due to pressures of work. It was anticipated that this would be initiated shortly.

- RESOLVED** that the performance and proposed remedial action against the Service Plans for the fourth quarter of 2006/07, be noted.

*14 **Play Strategy**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director – Communities on the request by the Committee for a further review of the Play Strategy adopted by the Council on 7 February 2007. Members welcomed the excellent report and noted that the Play Strategy had helped achieve £204,000 of Big Lottery funding for play schemes in East Devon. This funding would go to seven specific sites in East Devon. The Corporate Director – Communities confirmed that all the money had now been allocated.

RESOLVED that the Corporate Director – Communities and Funding Coordinator be congratulated on achieving the £204,000 Big Lottery grant for play equipment in East Devon.

*15 **Appeal Status Report**

Members considered the report of the Head of Planning & Countryside Services which provided an overview of the situation regarding planning appeals over the last year and drew out the themes and lessons to be drawn from that exercise. This report had been previously discussed at Executive Board.

It was noted that the percentage of planning appeals allowed had increased in 2006/07 compared with previous years. The level of appeals was only 128 out of about 3500 planning applications received in 2006/07. Members emphasised the need to ensure that policies were correct.

The high number of decisions made by delegations was noted. The possibility of new Members sitting on delegated decisions sessions with the Chairman or Vice Chairman was discussed. The Head of Planning and Countryside Services confirmed that this would be possible, but emphasised that the actual decisions were delegated to her. If new Members attended delegated decision making then a protocol would have to be established.

Members noted that there had been very few instances of costs being awarded against this Council where the appeals had been lost. The Head of Planning and Countryside Services confirmed that the Development Control Committee had responsibility for this area of the Council's work.

RESOLVED that the Development Control Committee be asked to give consideration to improving Member training on delegated decision making, which could include the possibility of making a training video on this subject.

*16 **Charges for major pre-application advice, tree advice & Member involvement in pre-app activity**

Members considered the report of the Head of Planning & Countryside Services regarding the possible introduction of charges for pre-application planning advice, which was considered by the Executive Board on 6 June 2007.

RESOLVED that the report to the Executive Board and the decisions made be noted.

*17 **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Consideration was given to the Forward Plan for the Scrutiny Committee. Members noted that the training evening had been postponed until later in the year. Members noted that there would be no meeting on 15 August 2007. It was hoped that a date for the Chairman of the Primary Care Trust to attend a meeting could be arranged.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan be noted.

*18 **Task and Finish Forum Status Report**

Members noted the Task and Finish Forum Status report which presented details of the current Task and Finish Forum.

RESOLVED

that the Task and Finish Forum Status Report be noted.

Chairman

Date.....