

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 18 April 2006

Present:

Councillors:

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| P W Burrows (Chairman) | Mrs M A Rogers |
| A R Giles (Vice-Chairman) | A J Toye |
| D J Cox | Mrs E E Wragg |
| Mrs A E Liverton | Mrs L A Roden |
| Mrs F I Newth | |

Also present:

Councillors:

| | |
|----------------|----------------|
| T A Cope | A T Moulding |
| P A Diviani | Ms S M Merritt |
| Miss J M Elson | J B Nicholson |
| R G Franklin | Mrs P A Stott |
| S Hughes | S C Wragg |
| G K Liverton | |

Apologies:

Councillors:

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| Mrs K J Bamsey | D R A Key |
| Mrs C E Drew | Dr H W Waterworth |
| H J Jeffery | |

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 7.45pm

*26

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 4 April 2006, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

The Corporate Director – Central Services advised Members that the Chairman of the Corporate Overview Committee had agreed to hold a joint Overview and Scrutiny meeting in September 2006 to give early consideration to future budget and service plans. This had been suggested by Members at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in January 2006.

Discussion took place on the budget and service plan annual cycle and the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Members were advised that following the September meeting, Heads of Service would hold their Service Planning Days throughout October and November. The Plans and budget proposals would then be considered by members in early 2007.

Following a comment on whether the process should actually start in June, it was explained that the timetable presented at the previous Scrutiny Meeting showed that the Medium Term Financial Plan preparations did start in June/July.

Councillor Mrs Rogers asked for it to be recorded that she felt some disquiet at the timings.

*27

Consideration of the development of policy on Traveller Sites

The Head of Planning and Countryside Services and the Head of Environmental Health and Health Equalities jointly advised Members on the Council's position regarding the development of a policy on Gypsy and Traveller Sites.

The Housing Act 2004 placed a duty on local authorities to assess the housing needs of Gypsies and Travellers and to reflect these in their housing strategies and planning policies. The expectations of the Government with regard to this were reinforced in a circular received by the Council in February 2006. To address these issues East Devon District Council had joined with other local authorities in Devon to take part in a County wide survey. The survey, otherwise known as the Gypsy and Travellers Housing Needs Assessment, was being managed by Plymouth City Council and was based on best practice from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Work on the survey began in March 2006, it would be finished in July 2006 and the results made available in October 2006. The survey was being carried out by the University of Plymouth Social Research and Regeneration Unit and would include an assessment of past and present encampments within each district.

Running alongside the survey a multi-agency group was in the process of drawing up a Devon - wide protocol to ensure a consistent approach across the County for dealing with unauthorised sites.

Members were advised that there was still a lot of work to be carried out. Only when the results of the survey had been received could consideration be given to the implications for East Devon. The location and type of potential sites had to be driven by the Needs Assessment.

The survey would ideally have informed the Local Plan but the results would be available too late, likewise it could not be included in the Regional Spatial Strategy as this was already published in draft form for consultation purposes.

Members noted that the development of a policy on Gypsy and Traveller sites had been considered at meetings of the Portfolio Holder – Environment's Think Tank.

Discussion took place on the role of Think Tanks. Councillor Mrs Rogers asked for it to be recorded that Members of Think Tanks would be expected to tell other members of their party what was discussed at their Think Tank meetings.

(Councillor A R Giles declared a personal interest in this item as a member of the Devon County Council Gypsy Site Working Party)

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Communications Task and Finish Forum

Members considered the final report of the Communications Task and Finish Forum (TaFF). Councillor Giles as Chairman of the TaFF thanked by name all the Councillors and Officers who had been involved in the meetings and was in turn thanked for his work in chairing it. The TaFF had involved not only East Devon District Councillors but also representatives of Town and Parish Councils and the press. The aim had been to draw up a list of recommendations to improve the Councils internal and external communications. Further work would be carried out into how communications with young people could be improved and what could be learnt in terms of communications from the 'Unlocking Exmouth' project.

28 **Communications Task and Finish Forum** (Cont.)

Members were advised that although cost implications for each recommendation were included in the report, the TaFF had set out with the aim of improving communications rather than to save, or spend, money on them. Most of the recommendations that would result in a cost could be accommodated within existing budgets. The TaFF did recognise however that costs were important and therefore did not make a concrete recommendation regarding the web casting of Council meetings. Members considered the cost of providing web casting to be too expensive at the current time to warrant the investment.

Discussion took place on the recommendations regarding Councillor mentors, the advising of Ward Members about press releases, the proposal to add a strap line to new Council fleet and street furniture and the recommendation that Councillors advise the Communications Officer when they comment to the media direct on major issues.

Recommendation 1 referred to the availability of committee papers online. Members noted that agendas for Task and Finish Forums were not available online but that this would be looked into. A report would be presented to the Executive Board setting out a policy with regard to who should receive agendas on paper and who should be sent an electronic link to them.

Members noted that there was no item on the agenda to propose topics for discussion at the next meeting.

RECOMMENDED that the recommendations of the Communications Task and Finish Forum as amended in bold type and attached as Appendix A to these minutes be approved.

RESOLVED that 'items for discussion at the next meeting' be a standard item for inclusion on agendas for all future Scrutiny Committee meetings.

Chairman Date.....

Communications Task and Finish Forum Report and Recommendations

Introduction

At the inaugural meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 22 June 2005, it was resolved that Communication (using the Best Value 2002 report as a base and to include communication with Town and Parish Councils) would be one of five topics to be scrutinised by the Committee during 2005/06.

At a meeting on 21 September 2005, the Scrutiny Committee received a report entitled 'A review of communications' and resolved that a Communications Task and Finish Forum be established comprising the following members:

- Roger Giles (who was elected as Chairman)
- Derek Button
- Christine Drew
- Ann Liverton.

The Forum was tasked with presenting a report of its work to the Scrutiny Committee in April 2006.

Terms of Reference

The Communications Task and Finish Forum agreed at its first meeting that its Terms of Reference would be based on the themes contained in the report to Scrutiny Committee on 21 September:

1. Review and improve internal communication as a tool for organisational change with particular emphasis on communicating the corporate goals (Peer Review).
2. Review the complaints procedure and opportunities to ensure that learning is shared between services (Peer Review). This is already underway.
3. Review and improve external communication (Peer Review) and the links between this and 'reputation management'.
4. Ensuring there is a shared understanding and clear articulation of our internal and external communication strategy.
5. Marketing and selling the Council's services – review all scheduled external publications to ensure consistency and coverage of services and that our customers know what service levels/standards they should expect (Peer Review).
6. Review and improve communication with parishes and the voluntary sector (Peer Review).
7. Develop a shared understanding of the strategic direction of Customer Access (Peer Review).
8. Maximise use of technology as an enabler to improve communication internally and externally.
9. Review the need to increase resources to meet the communication challenges raised through external assessment.
10. Ensure that the Council establishes a means by which it can formally assess the value for money provided by its services. (This is being actioned through the use of resources self assessment work led by the Corporate Director of Economy).

Summary of the content of meetings

The Communications Task and Finish Forum met on seven occasions between October 2005 and April 2006. The themes of the monthly meetings were:

- To agree the Terms of Reference of the Forum.
- Communications with Members.
- The Complaints Procedure.
- Communications with Town and Parish Councils.
- Internal communications.
- External communications.
- To complete unfinished business and consider this report.

Further information on the issues considered at each meeting and a list of the recommendations arising from them are set out below.

Other Members and Officers who attended the Forum's meetings

Other Members who attended meetings of the Forum were:

- Jed Falby
- Chris Gibbings
- Stuart Hughes
- Bill Waterworth.

Officers who attended meetings of the Forum on a regular basis were:

- Denise Lyon, Corporate Director – Central Services
- Karen Jenkins, Head of Organisational Development
- Bob Darbourne, Policy Manager
- Nick Stephen, Communications Officer.

Officers and invited guests who attended individual meetings are identified below.

First meeting held on 11 October 2006

At this meeting Members agreed the Terms of Reference of the Forum, the people who should be invited to attend future meetings and a timetable of meetings.

Second meeting held on 15 November 2005

Consideration was given to communication with Members. The results of the Members' survey on communications in 2001 were studied and Members discussed the use of different communication tools, for example voicemail, Member welcome days, emails and use of jargon. Members wish to encourage a culture within EDDC which recognises that Members are a resource which staff can use to useful effect. Diana Vernon, Member Services Manager, attended this meeting.

| Number: | Recommendation: | Lead Officer | Cost implications: |
|----------------|--|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. | That Councillors who are not members of committees be sent the electronic link to agendas and reports on the Council's web site. | CP | Saving |

| Number: | Recommendation: | Lead Officer | Cost implications: |
|---------|--|--------------|---------------------------|
| 2. | All Councillors who wish to receive a hard copy of the Executive Board agenda should be sent one | RP | Already within the budget |
| 3. | That every effort be made to enable all Councillors to benefit from the e-members project and have access to the internet, email facilities and computer training. | CP | Already within the budget |
| 4. | That Councillors be kept up-to-date, particularly in respect of relevant major issues within their wards and official visits to their wards. | RP | Staff time |
| 5. | That acknowledgement of Councillors' emails, faxes, letters and planning comments becomes standard practice and response times included within the Customer Service standards. | DL | Staff time |
| 6. | That consideration be given to web casting certain Council meetings at a later date once the cost has fallen to an acceptable level. | DL | £40,000 over 3 years |
| 7. | That newly appointed Chairmen and Vice Chairmen undergo relevant training. | DV | Training costs |
| 8. | That Member welcome days be of half a day duration with relevant specific issues being introduced at the start of each meeting. | DV | No cost implication |
| 9. | That use of jargon and acronyms be reduced and properly explained. | DV | No cost implication |
| 10. | That ways of raising Members' awareness of the Communications Calender, the role of the Communications Officer, the Council's Corporate Priorities and the Plain English Standard be investigated. | NS/DL | No cost implication |
| 11. | That measures are taken to improve the standard of voicemail messages and return calls to achieve a consistent, good practice approach | DL | No cost implication |
| 12. | That on major issues where there is consensus across the Council, comments from the non-majority groups should be included in the press release if possible. | NS | No cost implication |
| 13. | That all Members commenting to the media direct on major issues should inform the Communications Officer. | NS | No cost implication |

| Third meeting held on 13 December 2005 | | | |
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| Members looked at the Complaints Procedure and planned for the following meeting of the Forum. Debbie Meakin, Senior Policy Officer, attended this meeting. | | | |
| Number: | Recommendation: | Lead Officer | Cost implications: |
| 14. | Various suggestions were made regarding the complaints procedure and leaflet which have been incorporated into the new procedure and revised 'Help us improve our services' leaflet. | DM | Procedure and leaflet duly amended |
| 15. | That the Portfolio Holder and the Committee Chairman (if relevant, for example Licensing or Development Control) may be told about any complaints at stage two. Relevant Ward Members to be given brief details with the option of asking for more information if wanted (subject to the complainant not objecting to this). | DM | Staff time |
| 16 | That the automatic acknowledgement letter sent at stage two should incorporate a sentence saying that relevant Ward Members would be advised of the complaint unless they had any objections. | DM | No cost implication |
| 17. | That a progress report be sent if a full response can not be made within 3 weeks. | DM | Existing practice |
| 18. | That Members be encouraged to check their facts with Officers before personally replying to complaints. | DV | Occasional advice in The Knowledge |
| 19. | That following the original complaint the complainant be advised of the action taken to address the cause of the complaint. | DM | Existing practice |
| 20. | That the use of Parish Magazines be investigated as a medium for positive publicity. | NS/DV | Audit of parish magazines |

| Fourth meeting held on 17 January 2006 | | | |
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| <p>Members and Clerks of Budleigh Salterton Town Council, Clyst Hydon Parish Council, Colyton Parish Council and Dunkeswell Parish Council were invited to attend this meeting to share their thoughts and experiences of communicating with the Council.</p> <p>Members were advised of proposals to donate computers no longer required by the Council to Town and Parish Councils together with a limited support service and access to in-house computer training. The frequency of postings to Town and Parish Councils was debated as was the consultation carried out with regard to planning applications.</p> <p>Chris Powell, Head of ICT, and John Milverton, Development Control Manager, attended this meeting.</p> | | | |
| Number | Recommendation: | Lead Officer: | Cost implications: |
| 21. | That Member Services Officers be promoted as a first point of contact for Town and Parish Councils. | RP | Staff time |
| 22. | That the Taff supports the principal of making computers no longer required by the Council available to Town and Parish Councils. | CP | Already within the budget |
| 23. | That the TaFF supports the principal of the ICT team giving computer demonstrations during the Annual Town and Parish Council meetings with EDDC in March 2006. | CP | Staff time |
| 24. | That Clyst Hydon Parish Council be recommended to contact the DAPC regarding the possibility of setting up additional Parish Council groups elsewhere in the district. | CHPC | No cost implications |
| 25. | That ICT Services look into setting up a link from the Council's web site to a Town and Parish Council page. | CP | Staff time |

| Fifth meeting held on 14 February 2006 | | | |
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| <p>Members considered communications by post, the Communications Policy, the Investors in People report, the Peer Review follow-up report, a communications survey of front-line staff who were involved in the Peer Review follow-up and Member welcome days.</p> <p>Martin Millmow, Xerox Print and Post Room Manager, and Steven Power, Urban Designer, attended this meeting.</p> | | | |
| Number | Recommendation: | Lead Officer: | Cost implications: |
| 26. | That Members ensure that they check their pigeon holes whenever they are at Knowle. | DV | Occasional advice in The Knowledge |
| 27. | That Members be reminded to pass their apologies onto Member Services whenever they are unable to attend a meeting, especially a meeting of the full Council, to enable post to be sent/withheld as appropriate. | DV | Occasional advice in The Knowledge |
| 28. | That Xerox be instructed to change the day on which post is sent to Councillors from Mondays to Fridays. | CP | No cost implications |
| 29. | That no post be sent out to Members on the night of a full Council Meeting unless their apologies have been given. | DV/CP | Potential saving |
| 30. | That the permanent projection equipment be installed for use during Council meetings, for example to regularly display the Council's priorities. | CP | Estimated cost £1,500 |
| 31. | That Council agendas and reports include information on which priorities any particular item meets. | DL | Staff time |
| 32. | That more in-house ICT training be provided for Members, to include training on the 'Planning Online' system. | CP | Staff time |
| 33. | That the Leaders of all the political 'groups' be advised that it is expected of them to provide a mentor for any new Member regardless of their political persuasion. | DL | No cost implications |
| 34. | That the TaFF supports the funding and appointment of an Assistant Communications Officer. | DL | Special item bid |

| Sixth meeting held on 14 March 2006 | | | |
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| Members considered external communications which covered managing media relationships, communications, marketing and branding, future options for communications and Council publications. Councillor Stuart Hughes, Portfolio Holder for Communication and John Goodwin, District News Editor for the Express and Echo, were invited to attend this meeting. The meeting was preceded by a visit to the Print and Post Room by Members. | | | |
| Number | Recommendation: | Lead Officer: | Cost implications: |
| 35. | That all Services be reminded to advise the Communications Officer of any events/stories coming up which could be of media interest. | NS | Staff time |
| 36. | That Officers be asked to advise the Communications Officer of any good news/human interest stories which arise to allow the 'human face' of the Council to be publicised more. | NS | Staff time |
| 37. | That the Council considers advising the media in advance of significant cases being taken to court. | NS | Staff time |
| 38. | That Ward Members be made aware of any press releases/statements issued concerning their ward. | NS | Staff time |
| 39. | That the Communications Officer update a weekly 'What's on in East Devon' list for the website. | NS | Staff time |
| 40. | That a strap line, for example 'Another service from EDDC' be added onto the livery of all new EDDC vehicles, equipment and street furniture. | NS | Costings needed |
| 41. | That the Chief Executive/Leader records a monthly message to residents. | MW | Webcasting costs |
| 42. | That the East Devon District Council logo be included on the front cover of the 'Working together for you' publication. | NS | No cost implications |
| 43. | That if possible when East Devon Talk is included within Devon Talk it does not split a centre page spread. | NS | No cost implications |
| 44. | That the Portfolio Holder – Communications be consulted on publications to be despatched to every household. | NS | No cost implications |
| 45. | That Officers review how the Communications budget is spent. | DL | Staff time |

| Seventh meeting held on 3 April 2006 | | | |
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| <p>At the meeting Members considered ideas of good practice suggested by other authorities, the revised Complaints leaflet and arrangements to consult young people. 'Unlocking Exmouth' was raised at various points, but this has been overtaken by discussion at Overview Committee. The meeting also considered a draft version of this report.</p> <p>During the next few months, Forum Members will consult young people on how the Council could improve communications with them by visiting one of the Community Colleges in the District and by attending a meeting of the Connexions VIP Group</p> | | | |
| Number | Recommendation: | Lead Officer: | Cost implications: |
| 46. | That an annual communications audit is carried out to test external opinion and get honest feedback on the services we provide. | NS | Staff time |
| 47. | That the Council publishes an A-Z of services as an updated version of the 2005 Residents' Handbook. | NS | Staff time |
| 48. | That volunteer Communications Contacts be appointed for each Service. | NS | Staff time |
| 49. | That work be carried out to raise Members and Officers awareness of the Corporate Communications Calendar. | NS | Occasional advice in The Knowledge |
| 50. | That consideration be given to more widespread use of 'back to the floor' days. | KJ | Staff time |
| 51. | That Managers be encouraged to attend team meetings in their own areas. | KJ | Staff time |

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications contained within this report.

Financial implications:

Webcasting has initial capital costs for equipment and ongoing revenue costs of annual subscriptions and staffing. Other recommendations costings as detailed in the report.