

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 20 September 2006

Present:

Councillors:

P W Burrows (Chairman)
A R Giles (Vice-Chairman)

R W Boote
Mrs C E Drew
H J Jeffery
Mrs A E Liverton
Mrs F I Newth

Mrs M A Rogers
B J Toyne
Dr H W Waterworth
Mrs E E Wragg

Also Present:

Councillors:

Miss V Ash
Mrs M J Boote
Miss J M Elson
C F A Gibbings
S C Luxton

Ms S M Merritt
B Nicholson
Miss S M Randall Johnson
Mrs P A Stott

Apologies:

Councillors:

D J Cox

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.06pm

*13 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 26 July 2006, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

*14 **Performance Indicators**

Consideration was given to three of the Performance Indicators that had been included in the report to the Executive Board on 13 September 2006.

Members were advised that an action plan had been drawn up to increase the number of vacant dwellings returned to occupation or demolished, as measured by Performance Indicator BV64. The action plan had been implemented during the previous few months. Members noted that the Officer notes on the Performance Indicator report needed updating with regard to this.

Consideration was given to Performance Indicator BV204, number of planning appeals allowed. The Head of Planning and Countryside Services advised that it was not unusual to have odd variances in the outcome of appeals on a month to month basis as they were the result of an individual inspector's judgement. Over the course of the year the average number of appeals dismissed in the Council's favour was greater than the national average.

With regard to Performance Indicator BV109c, the number of planning applications 'other', the Head of Planning and Countryside Services advised Members that this number had fallen due to a shortage of planning officers and the onset of the holiday period.

*14 **Performance Indicators (Cont.)**

Members were advised that a shortage of experienced planning officers would not automatically result in an increase in the number of appeals lost as all decisions and Officers recommendations made passed through a strict quality control process.

*15 **Appeals status report**

Members considered the report of the Head of Planning and Countryside Services that provided a general overview of the current situation regarding planning appeals. The number of appeals made against the Council was increasing year on year however statistically the performance of the Council had remained relatively steady. The Council handled approximately 170 appeals a year of which, on average 70% were dismissed. This dismissal rate was higher than the national average. East Devon District Council was the top rural authority with regard to appeals success for those authorities receiving over 150 appeals per year.

Members were advised that costs had been awarded against the Council only three times during the current year. It was noted that this was a very small figure compared with the number of applications dealt with by the authority every year.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and the Planning Service be advised of the Committee's support.

16 **Performance Indicator L64 – evidence**

Consideration was given to the report of the Member Services Manager with regard to the training provided for the benefit of members of the Development Control Committee and the level of take up.

The Head of Planning and Countryside Services advised Members that the main planning training had been the two day training event run by Trevor Roberts Association in July 2004. This had been followed up with additional events held on an ad hoc basis on a variety of planning topics. The Chairman of the Council had been asked to grant permission for a training session to be held after the December Council meeting, in line with Members recommendations made at the previous meeting of this committee. Town and Parish Councillors had received training at their annual Town and Parish Council meetings over the previous two years and had received visits in person from the Head of Planning and Countryside Services and the Development Control Manager.

Discussion took place on the providers of training, the level of take up, the variety of organisations that offer training to Members and whether attendance at training sessions should be compulsory for members of the Development Control Committee. It was suggested that a lot of experience could be gained by attending Development Control meetings and that it would be difficult to make training compulsory.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

RECOMMENDED that members of the Development Control Committee be strongly recommended to undertake training prior to sitting on the Committee.

*17

Quarterly monitoring of service plans – first quarter 2006/07

Consideration was given to the report of the Policy Manager with regard to the quarterly monitoring of performance in relation to the actions contained in the Service Plans for 2006/09.

Members were advised that completion of the housing stock options appraisal had been categorised as 'red' due to the delay in submitting the final report to the Government Office South West for signing off. The report had been completed within Council targets but did not fall within the Governments target. Notification had now been received that the Government Office had signed the report off indicating a successful completion of the project.

Members noted the Officer Notes with regard to the action 'to look for alternative fund raising activities related to property sales – Home Information Packs (HIPs) and Home Condition Reports (HCRs). The Head of Planning and Countryside Services advised that this had been categorised as 'red' because although the target date had not been reached the action had been assessed and Officers had found out that it would not be possible to conduct any alternative fund raising activities. In addition Officers had been advised that in future Land Charges services would have to be made available at cost price. Official notification of the introduction date for this was awaited.

Members were advised that although work had commenced on the production/renewal of strategies and policies for Street Scene Services, progress had been hampered by other priorities impacting on the service.

The Head of Finance advised Members that the action 'complete full implementation of the Financial Management System and Income Management System' had been categorised as 'amber' because although the systems had been fully implemented some Officers had not yet undergone the necessary training.

The action 'update the ICT Service Level Agreement' had been classified as 'amber' because although there had been a delay in achieving this it was not seen as a matter of significant concern.

Members were advised that work had not yet started on the rewriting of the Local Government Pension Scheme Discretionary Policy in plain English as Government policy had changed again recently with regard to this.

Members noted that the report contained several acronyms and requested that these be set out in full in future reports.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

18

Refurbishment of public conveniences

Members considered the report of the Head of Street Scene Services which set out the proposed refurbishment priorities for public conveniences. Following the review of public conveniences in East Devon in 2004, a number of sites had been closed, demolished, leased or otherwise disposed of. The remaining sites had been looked at with a view to upgrading, rebuilding or otherwise improving and modernising the facilities.

The toilets considered as priorities were identified as

- Station Road, Budleigh Salterton
- West Walk, Seaton
- The Triangle, Sidmouth
- East End, Budleigh Salterton

18 Refurbishment of public conveniences (Cont.)

It was anticipated that the work on the Station Road toilets would commence during the current financial year. The West Walk, Seaton toilets needed upgrading to meet with Disability Discrimination Act regulations. The Triangle toilets in Sidmouth suffered from intermittent drainage problems and the East End toilets in Budleigh Salterton were generally in a poor state of repair. Members were advised that there was currently £50,000 in the budget for upgrading toilets. On average it cost between £30,000 and £40,000 to upgrade one toilet block.

Discussion took place on the possibility of charging for the use of toilets, the possible use of Section 106 funds to upgrade facilities, the revenue costs associated with remaining toilets and the annual cost of vandalism and maintenance work.

RECOMMENDED that the Head of Street Scene Services produce a report for the November meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to include available information on:

- The location of remaining toilets
- An idea of average usage for each toilet facility
- The average cost of vandalism for each facility
- Total cost of keeping each toilet open
- Revenue contributions by Town and Parish Councils
- An assessment of those in very poor condition which may warrant a recommendation to the Executive in support of disposal
- The viability of introducing 'paid for' public toilets

19 Report of the Service Planning Template Task and Finish Forum

Members considered the report of the Policy Manager that set out the suggestions of the Service Planning Template Task and Finish Forum. Members were advised that the main aim of the Forum had been to streamline the service planning template and to make the documents produced more useful and effective.

It was noted that following consultation with officers, further amendments had been made to the template after it had been considered by the Forum.

RECOMMENDED that:

- the suggestions made by the Service Planning Template Task and Finish Forum, as set out in the report, and the proposed template be approved, subject to the number of key achievements requested being set at between 6 and 10 with these being decided by the Head of Service in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder
- the template remain unchanged next year to promote stability for Heads of Service in service planning unless there is an overwhelming and compelling reason to amend it.

***20 The effectiveness of Member involvement in the political, advisory and decision making arrangements of the Council**

Consideration was given to the discussion document with regard to the different committee structures that had been adopted by this council since the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000, the structures adopted by 'excellent' councils and guidance from various organisations on how to improve overview and scrutiny functions.

*20 **The effectiveness of Member involvement in the political, advisory and decision making arrangements of the Council** (Cont.)

Members considered whether there was a real distinction between the roles of overview and scrutiny, whether the Council's political structure encouraged significant challenge, whether there should be a dedicated Scrutiny Officer and whether the committee structure should be amended to enable all Members to be formally engaged in the decision making process. It was suggested that one of the key strengths of the current system was that any Member could turn up and speak at any meeting of the Council. This was encouraged by Committee Chairmen. In addition, Task and Finish Forums were acknowledged as being constructive, useful, cross party bodies.

Janet Wilson, Member Services Officer was thanked for the work she put into the report.

RESOLVED that a Task and Finish Forum be established to look at the effectiveness of Member involvement in the political, advisory and decision making arrangements of the Council, with a membership of 7 Members, politically representative, being jointly agreed by the Chairmen of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

21 **Task and Finish Forum Management Plan**

Consideration was given to a report explaining which Task and Finish Forums were currently meeting and how many Forums could be serviced at any one time.

RECOMMENDED that follow up reports be produced after Task and Finish Forums have been completed to show what actions have been taken with regard to their recommendations.

*22 **Forward plan**

Consideration was given to the forward plan detailing topics for discussion at future meetings of the Committee. It was noted that following the discussion earlier in the meeting public conveniences would be added to the plan for consideration at the November meeting.

Councillor Giles circulated a selection of documents on a proposal to reuse East Devon disused railway lines as cycle routes.

RESOLVED that the documents on a proposal to reuse East Devon disused railway lines as cycle routes be put on the agenda for the next meeting of the Committee to enable a decision to be made regarding possible future action.

Chairman Date.....