

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview/Scrutiny – Communities Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on Wednesday 24 June 2009

Present:

Councillors:

Helen Parr (Chairman)
Graham Troman (Vice Chairman)
Vivienne Ash
Christine Drew
Roger Giles
Marion Olive
Philip Skinner
Mark Williamson

Officers:

Sue Bewes – Housing Strategy Manager
John Golding – Head of Housing and Social Inclusion
Peter Jeffs – Corporate Director
John Maidment – Planning Policy Manager
Rachel Perram – Democratic Services Officer

Also Present

Councillors:

Graham Brown
Iain Chubb
Paul Diviani
Jill Elson
Mike Green
Ann Liverton
Graham Liverton
Andrew Moulding
Frances Newth
Bob Peachey
Pauline Stott

Apologies:

Ben Ingham
Ray Bloxham
Darryl Nicholas

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.10pm.

The Chairman welcomed everybody to the first meeting of the Overview/Scrutiny - Communities Committee. Members of the Committee agreed that the item on Sustainable Communities Act be taken after the item on Affordable Housing in East Devon, to enable a more meaningful discussion on sustainability to take place.

***1 Public question time**

There were no questions from the public raised at this meeting.

*2 **Remit of the Overview/Scrutiny – Communities Committee**

Five meetings were scheduled for the Committee each year. The remit proposed covered:

- Affordable housing, housing availability.
- Urban, rural and Safe Communities.
- Developing, reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of the Council's work on equality and diversity.
- Developing and implementing the community empowerment visions.
- Scrutinise community engagement and empowerment initiatives and governance arrangements, with input from communities to drive improvement.

The Corporate Director reminded members of the Committee that their role was to scrutinise Officers, outside bodies and the work of Portfolio Holders.

Members of the Committee noted that Environmental Health and Culture were missing from the remit list.

3 **Resolutions from the former Scrutiny Committee on improvement to the Scrutiny Function**

Members focussed discussion on two of the resolutions from the Scrutiny Committee:

Training (resolution 2 referred)

The Chairman advised Members that she would be attending a training session on Scrutiny at Mid Devon District Council on 20 July and that Members would be de-briefed after this.

Dedicated Officer (resolution 4 referred)

Members of the Committee agreed that a dedicated officer for the Scrutiny and Overview function would be very beneficial, even though the creation of this role had not been supported by the Executive Board. The Chairman advised that this matter had been raised by the other Scrutiny/Overview Committees and would be discussed at the Co-ordinating Committee.

Members agreed that it was important for all the Scrutiny/Overview Committees to have a period in which to get established and to start to drive forward their work so that the exact role of a facilitating officer could be clearly defined. Members took into account the difficult current economic climate in their discussions.

RECOMMENDED: that the Scrutiny/Overview Committee – Communities support the principle of a dedicated Scrutiny Officer at a future date.

RESOLVED: that the original report to Scrutiny Committee of 12 November 2008 on Improvements to the Scrutiny Function be circulated to the Committee for their information.

4 **Affordable Housing in East Devon**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion showed Members of the Committee a presentation that highlighted a number of different types of affordable Housing Schemes that had been constructed within the past few years in East Devon. Although these schemes were excellent examples of what could be achieved, it was clear that East Devon had so far failed to deliver more than 61 houses in any year, against a Government target of 300 in the district.

Affordable Housing in East Devon cont'd...

Members noted that historically the Council had been very reliant upon the planning system for delivering housing development approval. It was clear however that this system could be inflexible and constrained progress – particularly true in the many rural areas of East Devon, where demand for affordable housing was high, but lacked availability in parcels of land that met planning and highway requirements. Although planning policy allowed for 100% affordable housing on 'exception sites', few landowners were prepared to make land available for development on this basis, as it gave them a limited financial return. However, an exception scheme was due to commence in Colyton and the Council had already helped to deliver an excellent exception scheme in Beer.

Members noted that despite limited funds, the Council employed a dedicated 'Enabling Officer' and had developed a virtual "Affordable Housing Delivery Team", which included officers from housing and planning departments. Members welcomed the formation of this team and hoped that its good work would continue.

Members agreed that there needed to be a move towards a system of local determination on planning policy that could encompass such considerations as narrow lanes, lack of street lighting and future sustainability in rural areas. Consultation with parish and town councils was clearly an integral part of the planning process. Members recognised the work that had been carried out by communities in the production of Parish Plans. A thorough examination of their proposals for affordable housing land and suggestions from residents were key to moving this process forward. The Rural Champion felt strongly that Ward Members were to be encouraged to support affordable housing projects throughout the District, as long as sites were appropriate for that use. It was felt that there might be land owners that could fund development and to own houses and become landlord. Clinton Devon Estates had done this widely in East Devon for over 100 years.

The Deputy Leader of the Council proposed that the Council encourage a 'departure' route for proposals for affordable housing and some market housing. This could also allow affordable homes to be constructed on land that had no real financial value – such as agricultural and low-grade land on the periphery of towns and villages. It was a time for bold moves and tough decisions to drive these projects forward. The Council had recently recognised the need for development to be 'managed', rather than 'controlled' by their planning officers. Members agreed that departure sites needed to be approved but for the right reasons, such as sustainability in small communities. Such areas had already seen a huge erosion of facilities such as shops, post offices, public houses and public transport. It was clearly important to keep young people in villages and small towns.

Members heard of another Council in Devon that had been award 'Beacon' Council status for their work in delivering affordable housing schemes. Planning decisions had led to a number of successful schemes in that District proceeding with great success.

It was clear that developers were placing projects on hold and that social landlords were not interested in shared ownership schemes at present. This worrying situation was mainly due to problems with risk averse banks for funding and also due to difficulties with selling properties on in the current economic climate.

Due to Government policy, East Devon District Council paid £5.8 million from the Housing Revenue Account to Central Government last year. This meant that the Council was not in a position to afford large sums of money on social house building. Members felt strongly that they should continue to lobby Government to keep this money and ring fence these large sums for the provision of local affordable housing.

Affordable Housing in East Devon cont'd...

- RECOMMENDED:**
- 1) that pending the Local Development Framework (LDF) being developed, EDDC work with Parishes and Town Councils to identify acceptable 'departure sites' (allowing modest cross subsidy) on a site by site basis.
 - 2) that EDDC enter into discussion with County Highways to discuss its ambitions for affordable housing and to recognise the impact of highways objections upon these.
 - 3) that a summit be arranged with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), the Communities Agency, the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) and Council Members with the aim to move forward affordable housing development in East Devon.
 - 4) that privately developed affordable housing will be accepted but with the equivalent requirements to those expected of RSLs.
 - 5) that the Council continue to lobby Government on the subsidy paid to them from the Council's Housing Revenue Account.
 - 6) that Development Management review each site as to its overall capacity and consider whether the affordable housing threshold applies, irrespective of how the site is to be developed or the phasing of it.
 - 7) that the Council seeks to find new funding options for undertaking Housing Needs Surveys in rural locations.
 - 8) that where site viability is a genuine issue, the Council will consider reducing the affordable housing percentage (along with other planning gain).

5 **Sustainable Communities Act**

Members of the Committee heard that the Sustainable Communities Act was designed in part to help drive forward affordable housing. The report presented to Members at this meeting would be tabled at the Executive Board on 15 July – this was necessary to the tight timescales for proposal deadlines back to the Government.

Members noted that consultation had taken place with residents in East Devon, as a result of submissions received by local communities. Residents would be asked to prioritise proposals that had been submitted and to consider their merits. Affordable Homes was the top priority for residents in the creation of sustainable communities in East Devon. This mirrored the top priority for EDDC. Consultation over this Act was expected on an annual basis, with this being the first for discussion with residents. EDDC's role in this process was that of validator and facilitator.

In future, prioritised proposals would be examined by the Overview/Scrutiny – Communities Committee before going to the Executive Board.

Members agreed that it would be interesting to see what national priorities came out from the consultation results issued by Government.

RECOMMENDED: that the Chairman's proposal that *'All authorities keep the Housing Revenue Account subsidy to spend on affordable housing initiatives within their District'* be noted and that Cllr Mrs Pauline Stott would take this proposal to the forthcoming meeting of the Housing Review Board.

RESOLVED: that the consideration of proposals under the Sustainable Communities Act this year by the Executive Board on 15 July 2009 be noted.

*6 **Future meetings plan and key issues for Overview/Scrutiny – Communities Function**

Members noted the proposals for future meetings of the Committee and congratulated the Lead Officer on the clear format of those presented. A proposal was made to think about whether the Committee would like to hear from local groups in East Devon and their work - East Devon District Council funded and supported a number of these.

RESOLVED: that Members email their suggestions for future meeting agenda items to Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director and to the Chairman.

Chairman Date.....