

## Council news round-up February/March 2009

East  
Devon

District Council

This news round-up is being sent to all Town and Parish Councils. You may wish to include these highlighted topics in your parish magazines. For more detailed information, you can go straight to the Council web site for agendas, reports and minutes by following this link – [http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/index/your\\_council/committee\\_minutes\\_and\\_agendas.htm](http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/index/your_council/committee_minutes_and_agendas.htm)

### Devon Unitary Review – latest up-date

Mark Williams (Chief Executive 01395 517408)

The Secretary of State has advised that pursuant to her powers set out in section 4(3) of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, she has extended the date for the Boundary Committee's recommendations/advice from 13 February 2009 to 15 July 2009.

The extension is to allow for the Boundary Committee to prepare for further consultation, to consider responses, and formulate any advice it submits. Any advice from the Committee is at this stage proposed to be finalised and publicly available before any summer break, including the parliamentary recess. Accordingly, the Secretary of State has concluded, having regard to all relevant considerations, that in the circumstances a substitute date of 15 July 2009 is appropriate.

On 19 March, the Boundary Committee for England published further draft proposals for unitary local government in Devon. The report can be accessed at:

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/boundary-reviews/all-reviews/south-west/devon/devon-structural-review>

The Boundary Committee welcomes views on its further draft proposals by 14 May 2009. The Committee is now able to consult and advise on more than one 'draft proposal'. The report 'Further draft proposals for unitary local government in Devon' contains two patterns of unitary local government, namely:

- ❑ A Devon unitary authority comprising the existing county of Devon with no changes to Plymouth and Torbay
- ❑ An Exeter and Exmouth unitary authority and a unitary authority covering the remainder of the county, with no changes to Plymouth and Torbay.

The outcome of the Council's legal challenge in the Court of Appeal is awaited at the time of going to press, and the Boundary Committee's actions may yet further change in the light of this.

Mark Williams, Chief Executive, EDDC advises that he is available (subject to election commitments) to attend meetings to discuss the implications of the proposals - more information will be issued in due course.

### Car Park charging at community hospitals

Following a unanimous protest by the Council's Scrutiny Committee against the introduction of car park charging at community hospitals throughout the district, the Devon Primary Care Trust has confirmed (despite information that currently appears on its website) that they are not proposing to introduce charges at any community hospitals in East Devon other than Honiton and Whipton. The PCT has confirmed that there will be public consultation on these two hospitals before any recommendations are made.

## **East Devon tenants in Westminster protest**

On Wednesday 25 February, a EDDC tenants and Council Members delegation went to Westminster to address the House of Commons' Council Housing Inquiry Group to protest at what they call the Government's 'daylight robbery'.

In April 2008 there were 4,298 council properties in our district, all of which achieved the Decent Homes Standard. Through careful housekeeping and investment in housing stock over many years, a great deal has been achieved, but so much more could be done if the large subsidy paid to Government was withdrawn.

The Council has in excess of 4,500 households on its Housing Register seeking affordable housing in the district and in 2009/10 it expects to pay **£5.8 million** of its Housing Revenue Account (HRA) income, which is estimated at £14.5 million, to Government to redistribute to 'less well off' housing authorities. It is understood that the Government is now seeking an overall surplus in this budget and tenants are outraged.

The Housing and Social Inclusion Service of East Devon District Council and the Council's tenants would like to opt out of the HRA subsidy system and retain tenants' rental income, as they believe this would give them the freedom to improve services, invest in the housing stock and build new homes for the future. The £5.8 million would fund 97 new affordable homes a year if it was reinvested in East Devon at a grant rate of, for example, £60,000 per home. Provision of more affordable homes is the top priority for EDDC. Its Housing Market Assessment supports the need to provide 1,250 new affordable homes over the next five years to meet identified housing need.

EDDC's tenants are not going to allow an increase in the subsidy paid from their rents without 'putting up a fight.' The delegation asked Government to stop robbing them of much needed housing resources and to let EDDC keep receipts from rents and reinvest these in housing locally, instead of losing 40% of income each year to the subsidy system.

## **Budget 2009/10**

Council income has reduced largely as a result of the current 'credit crunch'. Less revenue has been generated from various income streams including car parks, planning applications and interest payments. This has resulted in a funding gap between monies available and service provision. Standard advice in the past has been to cut services to match budget but the Council has recognised the exceptional economic situation. Cutting valued services is seen as short-sighted and could damage the foundations of services which need to be in place when the recession is over. The Council is also concerned that significant increases in Council tax would put an additional burden on local residents already feeling the effect of the economic down-turn. As an exception, the Council has drawn from its reserve to balance the 2009/10 budget.

At the meeting of the Executive Board on 4 March 2009, the Leader advised that the cross-party Prioritisation Group was to be re-established to meet weekly to look closely at the Council's priorities, service delivery and core back-office functions. At the end of the process Members will streamline services to match the 2010 and beyond budget.

## **Council Tax guide**

Council Tax Bills for 2009-10 will be arriving at homes across East Devon in the middle of this month (March). With these bills is a really useful bright orange A5 guidance booklet which explains where the money goes. It also makes it easier for householders to understand the charging system and the many ways in which people can get help with payments.

For example, the booklet explains that EDDC collects council tax for parish councils (2%), Devon County Council (75%), Devon and Cornwall Police Authority (10%) and the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (5%). EDDC's share is just 8%.

EDDC's portion of the overall Council Tax bill has been frozen at last year's rate, so this part of the bill will show no increase. But the total that each household has to pay will still be more, because there have been increases in the charges made by some of the other organisations that are part of the Council Tax process.

The new booklet also contains helpful advice for those who may be struggling to pay household bills in these difficult times. The message is: "Don't bury your head in the sand. If you are in danger of getting into arrears, please seek advice from an EDDC advisor as soon as possible". Before dialling, please remember two things:

- ❑ This is a very hectic few weeks for staff in EDDC's Council Tax service, so phone lines may be busy. Please be patient if you can't get through first time
- ❑ To save you time, have a look through the orange guidance booklet, produced jointly by EDDC and its partner councils in East Devon, together with the police and fire authorities – it may just tell you what you need to know and save you a phone call.

The booklet will be available from the end of March on EDDC's website at:

<http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk>

***The direct line for Council Tax and Benefit enquiries is: 01395 517446.***

***The number for all general EDDC enquiries is 01395 516551.***

With their Council Tax Bill, householders will also receive a notice giving details of changes to Refuse and Recycling collections over the Easter, May and August Bank Holiday weekends.

### **Sustainable Communities Act**

[www.localworks.org/node/4](http://www.localworks.org/node/4) for special briefings for Councillors on the Act

The Council at its meeting on 15 April will be asked to approve the Executive Board's recommendation that this Council supports the bottom up process in the Sustainable Communities Act designed to allow local authorities and their communities to drive the action and assistance that central government gives in promoting thriving sustainable communities. The Act gives local authorities power to make proposals to government on the action and assistance government must take or give to promote sustainable communities. These proposals can be for a transfer of public money and function from central or regional control to local control. The Act defines sustainable communities broadly as having the four aspects of:

- The improvement of the local economy
- Protection of the environment
- Promotion of social inclusion, and
- Participation in civic and political activity.

The Act sets out a simple process for local communities to come up with ideas to be implemented for their benefit. These ideas are to be worked up in the first instance through the local council. If the ideas are mutually agreed, they are then referred to the Local Government Association (LGA) which will select the ideas with merit, using criteria, to put to the Government. The Government, in consultation with the LGA will then decide on the best ideas to be implemented. The Government will be obliged under the Act to consider all the ideas put forward through the LGA and give sound reasons for any refusals. Local councils could put joint proposals forward and these are likely to have the most weight. There is no limit to the number of proposals that can be put forward, the only stipulation at this stage (until the LGA selection criteria has been finalised) is that councils have a duty to engage with residents.

### **Corporate Strategy**

The Corporate Strategy is the Council's key corporate document that sets out our vision, priorities and values and drives the delivery of services to our customers and the allocation of resources. In recent months, the Council has reviewed and updated its Corporate Strategy to take account of fresh challenges, particularly the global economic downturn, in readiness for 2009/10. The updated Corporate Strategy is available on the Council's website

[http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/corporate\\_strategy\\_09\\_lowres.pdf](http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/corporate_strategy_09_lowres.pdf)

## Post Office network up-date 'Challenging the cuts'

The final report of the Devon and Torbay Post Office Task Force has been considered by the Council. The Council's Member Champion for Post Offices (Ken Potter) confirmed that the Task Force recognised the essential need for all levels of government to value the Post Office network both nationally and for the benefit of local communities. The Post Office network is vulnerable and positive action (including that the Post Office and mail operation are retained as one unit) is needed to make sure that they are retained as viable business units. The Task Force set out a series of recommendations which it would take forward to safeguard the Post Office network in Devon.

## New role for Standards Committee.

Since May 2008, East Devon District Council's Standards Committee has had responsibility for the initial assessment of Code of Conduct allegations and complaints. People concerned about the conduct of district, town or parish councillors serving within East Devon can now make their complaints directly to this Committee.

Previously, anyone wishing to complain about the conduct of elected councillors had to report their allegations to the Standards Board for England, who would decide whether to investigate. This responsibility has now been taken over by local authorities, with the Standards Board's role moving towards one of advice and support.

All councillors have to keep to a Code of Conduct to ensure that they maintain the high ethical standards the public expects from them. If a complainant reveals that a potential breach of this Code has taken place, East Devon District Council's independently-chaired Standards Committee may refer the allegations for investigation or decide to take other action. East Devon District Council is keen to ensure all its Members fully understand the Code of Conduct and has arranged training for all district, town and parish councillors. A training session has been arranged for 2.30 – 4.30 pm Wednesday, 22 April 2009 here at Knowle. (Please advise Diana Vernon 01395 517541 [dvernon@eastdevon.gov.uk](mailto:dvernon@eastdevon.gov.uk) if you wish to attend).

If you wish to complain about a councillor at East Devon District Council or town or parish councillors within the East Devon area then please put your complaint in writing and send it to: The Standards Committee, c/o The Monitoring Officer, East Devon District Council, Knowle, Sidmouth, EX10 8HL or email: [monitoringofficer@eastdevon.gov.uk](mailto:monitoringofficer@eastdevon.gov.uk)  
You can also complete a form online on the Council's website by clicking on to the homepage at [www.eastdevon.gov.uk](http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk) where more details are available.

## Flood victims to get information updates

The Council is issuing a **Flood Recovery Update** to homes within the in Feniton, Ottery St Mary, Tipton St John, Newton Poppleford and Budleigh Salterton areas. This gives updates on the progress made by councils and other agencies dealing with the aftermath of the crisis and will be of benefit to those residents affected by severe floods in October and December last year and also to people who escaped the 2008 flooding but whose homes could be at risk in the future.

The newsletter will also be available in Libraries and other outlets in villages. In some communities, copies will be available in association with parish newsletters.

Following the dramatic storms and flooding towards the end of 2008, the East Devon Flood Recovery Group was formed. This group is a partnership of councils and other agencies with an interest in ensuring that the flood warning, defence, response and recovery arrangements in East Devon are of the highest possible quality.

The Group hopes to learn lessons from the events of 2008, to improve the drainage infrastructure where possible and to keep the public informed of what is happening.

Representatives of Devon County Council, East Devon District Council, the Environment Agency, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, plus town and parish councils in the Otter Valley,

agreed that there are six major objectives as part of a wider action plan for recovery:

- to establish what had caused the flooding
- to assess how agencies performed in the aftermath
- to put into practice any lessons learned
- to make improvements to minimise flood risk
- to advise residents and businesses how to help themselves
- to keep people informed of progress through online and printed information.

The first issue of the information sheet details progress so far as authorities discuss what they can do to reduce the risk of flooding. It also gives a number of important tips on how people can help themselves to find out if flooding is imminent and what to do if it happens.

An electronic copy of the newsletter can also be seen by visiting EDDC's website at:

[http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/flood\\_recovery\\_update\\_newsletter\\_lowres\\_\(1\).pdf](http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/flood_recovery_update_newsletter_lowres_(1).pdf)

or via Devon County Council and Environment Agency websites.

### **Village Hall news**

Does your Village Hall or Community Centre need some work doing? Would you like some more ideas on how to help it make enough money to keep it open? Do you need help to find your way around current legislation for community buildings?

East Devon District Council is working with the Community Council of Devon (CCD) to provide a grant scheme for Village Halls and Community Centres. This grant is for capital projects only (not to help with running costs or routine repair or maintenance work or new curtains or carpets). This could include improving or even building new Village Halls/ Community Centres, putting in a new kitchen, adding a disabled toilet, repairing the floor or ceiling etc. The hall should be a charity governed by a trust deed based on either the Charity Commission approved village hall or community centre model trusts. It has two parts:

1. Grants of up to £30,000 from CCD. There must be match funding available of at least twice the amount of grant from other sources and/ or local fundraising, so for funding of £30,000 you would have to provide £60,000 from elsewhere. This level of grant is only available until 2010.
2. Funding of up to £6,000. Grants at this lower level can be for up to two thirds of the project. This is because funding applications for up to £6,000 can be funded through CCD and also by East Devon District Council. This joint scheme has been running for years, most recently benefitting community buildings in Whimple and East Budleigh.

To find out more about the funding scheme or apply for this funding visit:

[http://www.devonrcc.org.uk/page/village\\_hall\\_funding.php](http://www.devonrcc.org.uk/page/village_hall_funding.php) or phone 01392 383345

For Village Hall/ community centre queries, and to find out about other available funding, there is an advice and information service available through the Community Council of Devon (CCD) and the Devon Association of Community Buildings (DACB). They also offer local training courses which are very good value for money and run a Hallmark Award Scheme which can show that your hall is run to a nationally recognised standard.

The Community Council of Devon at: [www.devonrcc.org.uk](http://www.devonrcc.org.uk) and go to the 'Rural Community Buildings' item in the list on the left hand side or phone 01392 383345.

To find out more about the Devon Association of Community Buildings, which is a membership organisation, visit: [www.devonvillagehalls.co.uk/Pages/DACB](http://www.devonvillagehalls.co.uk/Pages/DACB) or phone 01392 383345.

There is also a useful document on our web site at:

[http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/running\\_community\\_venues.pdf](http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/running_community_venues.pdf)

