

Council news round-up November/December 2008/Jan 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

Devon Unitary Review – latest up-date

Mark Williams (Chief Executive 01395 517408)

The date for the Boundary Committee reporting to the Secretary of State has been pushed back by to the 13 February 2009. This means that the Secretary of State cannot make a decision until the 30 March 2009. In effect if there were to be a decision to go ahead for April 2010 it would mean an implementation period of less than a year after the parliamentary orders had been made.

The guidance for assessing the financial case has been 'clarified'. There has been a lot of disquiet in Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk that the current process and financial modelling appears to suggest that only a county unitary model will stack up financially. This is clearly a nonsense since such reasoning would mean that most if not all the current unitaries already existing or coming into force in April 2009 aren't financially viable.

EDDC is still of the opinion that the enhanced two-tier is the best option, since it can deliver the kind of savings the Government is seeking without the risk to democratic deficit funding and deteriorating service provision that the upheaval of reorganisation would cause.

At its meeting on Wednesday 14 January, the Council's Executive Board agreed to sanction an appeal against the High Court judgement following the Council's judicial review hearing in December.

Members voted for the appeal after receiving a report from the Chief Executive on the reasons behind Mr Justice Cranstone's decision which, he believed, made it clear that the judge had some serious reservations about the way the Boundary Committee carried out the tasks it was set by the Secretary of State. The Judge was critical of the Boundary Committee on a number of fronts, but stopped short of outright censure of them. The appeal has been supported to promote the interests of Devon's residents and local democracy.

Breckland District Council in Norfolk is mounting a similar appeal against a High Court Judgement handed down in December, concerning a local government review in East Anglia. Both cases are expected to be fast-tracked for hearing by the Appeal Court in February.

EDDC Housing Strategy 2008-2011

EDDC's Housing Strategy sets out the Council's vision for the provision of good quality, affordable homes, of the right size and in a suitable location being available to all households in the district.

Two of the main aims highlighted in the Strategy are the provision of more affordable housing and improving tenants' homes and services. The Strategy looks at the key challenges that the Council and its partner agencies will face over the next three years. It has been produced following wide consultation and makes an assessment of the local housing market and housing needs and the condition of the Council's housing stock, presenting a series of priorities and actions for the future.

Significant developments have taken place since the Housing Strategy 2004-2007 was drawn up in 2004. The Housing Service has undergone a Housing Stock Options Appraisal and an Audit Commission inspection of housing management services, both of which have influenced its 'direction of travel'. The Housing and Social Inclusion Service was restructured two years ago and two new units formed – the Housing Strategy Unit and the Housing Business Unit; this has helped separate strategic and operational functions.

The target is to deliver at least 200 affordable homes across the district from 2008-2011, with an aspiration to deliver up to 300 a year from 2011-2015. The Exeter and Torbay Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007 supports a need for an affordable housing development in the short term (next five years) of 1,250 new homes. EDDC recognises how difficult this will be in the current economic climate but anything less would signal lack of commitment to provide what is needed. The Housing Service is working closely with a number of developers and anticipates that three rural housing developments that are currently being progressed will provide approximately 47 new affordable homes over the next two to three years.

EDDC is the landlord of 4,298 tenanted properties, 176 leasehold flats and 761 garages (as at April 2008) and has a responsibility to ensure these properties are well maintained and upgraded. All EDDC's homes meet the Decent Homes Standard (a Government set target, which must be met by 2010, to ensure all social housing is wind and weather tight, warm and has modern facilities), the result of many years of careful investment and a commitment to provide tenants with somewhere suitable to live.

In 2007/08 the Council spent £4.5 million on work to tenants' homes and similar amounts will be spent in 2008/09 and 2009/10. The overwhelming majority of this work is carried out by local East Devon firms, who have tendered and won the business. Guidance from consultants and the Government model for business planning has been used to draw up these programmes.

In addition, £1.1 million will be spent each year on response repairs which, in 2007/08, numbered almost 10,000. With a customer service centre available to take calls, partnering arrangements with five contractors, and a performance monitoring system that helps manage contractors' workloads and response times, the Council is committed to providing a high level of support to its tenants and leaseholders.

The Strategy is available to view on the Council's web site – if you follow the link it will take you direct to the relevant page: http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/housing_policies_and_strategies

Independent mortgage advice – Homemaker – new Devon wide service.

(dedicated telephone helpline 01392 686760)

Home owners in East Devon who are worried about maintaining their mortgage payments can now get free advice and help from a new service. East Devon District Council, through the Devon Strategic Housing Group and local debt advice charity Homemaker Southwest, will offer free, independent and confidential advice to home owners about managing their mortgage payments during the current economic climate.

The new Devon wide service has funded an advisor who will discuss what options may be open to home owners to enable them to remain in their homes. However, it is important that home owners seek advice as early as possible. At the end of 2008 the Council of Mortgage Lenders expect 210,000 households to be more than three months in arrears, and this number is expected to increase to 500,000 by the end of 2009. This new service is trying to encourage people to seek help at the earliest opportunity whilst there is still room for negotiation with the lender.

Extension of Public Speaking to the Development Control Committee

Christopher Holland (Democratic Services Officer – 01395 517543)

East Devon District Council introduced public speaking at the Planning Inspections Committee meetings in 2002. A similar opportunity was introduced in the main Committees of the Council following the annual meeting in May this year. At that time Development Control was excluded due to the large Development Control agendas. The introduction of the new delegated scheme and more streamlined working within the planning section had led the Chairman of the Development Control Committee in consultation with the Chief Executive to extend the speaking procedure to the main Development Control Committee. This commenced at the meeting on 13 January 2009. Parish and Town Councils and members of the public will be able to speak on applications within their area which are being considered by the Committee. There is no requirement to apply in writing to speak. The Chairman will invite town and parish representatives to speak first following the introduction of the item by the planning officer. Speakers will have 3 minutes in which to ask their question/make their statements and will be expected to restrict their comments to planning considerations only.

Dog control order

From Wednesday 10 December 2008 until Friday 23 January 2009, East Devon District Council will be undertaking a public consultation on the introduction of Dog Control Orders in the district.

Residents are being asked for their views on a number of issues covered by the Order. These include dog exclusion zones; dogs on leads; dogs on leads by direction; poop and scoop; and the maximum number of dogs that may be walked by one person at any time.

Information, and an opportunity to comment, is available on the Council's website at http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/legal_and_member_services-dog_control_orders.

Possible exclusion areas and plans may be viewed at Town Council offices in Axminster, Budleigh Salterton, Exmouth, Honiton, Ottery St Mary, Seaton and Sidmouth.

EDDC's Environmental Health team will consider feedback from everyone who responds before any decisions about the introduction of a Dog Control Order are made.

Grant Opportunities:

Trees

National Tree Week has grants of up to £700 available for community groups that want to undertake well planned tree planting projects during Tree Week. The Fund is particularly interested in projects that will involve children in the planting of trees. Voluntary, community and charitable groups and Parish Councils may apply. The deadline for applications has not been announced yet but is likely to be in May 2009. For more information: www.treecouncil.org.uk

Parks and Open Spaces

Parks for People, run by the Heritage Lottery Fund have grants of between £250,000 and £5million available for projects involving urban or rural green spaces designed for informal recreation and enjoyment. This can include public gardens, walks, promenades, squares etc. Priority will be given to schemes that the community value, and actively involve local people. For more information: www.hlf.org.uk/English/howtoapply/ourgrantgivingprogrammes/parks+for+people

Bigger grants for community buildings

Communities in East Devon can now apply for up to £30,000 of funding to help them refurbish, improve or even build community buildings. Due to a windfall of half a million pounds from the sale of Exeter Airport, the Community Council of Devon (the CCD administers the multi-use community buildings grant) is able to raise (until 2010) the individual maximum grant it can give from £15,000 to £30,000. The fund isn't just for village halls; it is open to buildings anywhere in East Devon which are run by the local community on a charitable basis. A condition of each large application is that there must be match funding of at least twice the amount of the grant from other sources. You are urged to apply for the money available and advise the relevant people in your community. Smaller successful applications (of up to £6,000) will continue to be match funded through CCD and this Council. For more information: www.devonrcc.org.uk

Council's REACT team are now issuing Fixed Penalty Notices

EDDC has started to get tough on fly-tippers. Until now, REACT (EDDC's Respond, Enforce and Clean Team) has been educating the public whenever possible if offences have been observed. However, they are now taking a tougher stance and have begun to issue £80 Fixed Penalty Notices for a number of offences, including littering. The Council is committed as a priority to keep the East Devon environment safe, clean and green.

Help needed at East Devon's nature reserves

East Devon District Council's Countryside Service is running a series of volunteer work parties to get you out and active before your New Year resolutions wear off! These include:

Axe Estuary reserves

Work parties on the Axe will be on every second Friday of the month.

Offwell Woodland Education Centre

Devon Water Vole Project volunteers are going out nearly every week in 2009 to manage pond and river habitat to make it more suitable for water voles, helping them to gain a firmer foothold in Devon. Please ring Project Officer Mervyn Newman for meeting places and times on 01395 517557.

No experience is needed. Stout boots and gloves are advised and please bring a packed lunch. Anyone is welcome, but parents or guardians are asked to stay with under 16s. Please contact the Countryside Service on 01395 517557 for more information.

Customer Service Excellence

The Council's Environmental Health Service has been recognised for its excellent customer service. It was awarded Chartermark in January 2007 and passed a reassessment in January 2008. The service has now been awarded the Government's prestigious Customer Service Excellence Standard. This standard is a practical tool for driving customer-focused change

The Assessor was very impressed with new initiatives which had been introduced and, above all, 'with the level of commitment, empowerment, customer awareness and focus, drive, enthusiasm and determination to improve of **all** the staff in the service'. This was reflected in the extremely positive feedback he received from customers.

Members of the team have worked very hard to understand their customers' needs and to work with them to design and provide the services they require.

Noise Abatement Society award

Along with many widely appreciated benefits, the introduction on 1 July 2007 of smoke free public buildings and workplaces by the Health Act 2006 brought with it another, unintended consequence - noise. Fearful that smokers and their friends would bring all the noise that is part and parcel of their pub or club experience out onto the pavement or into the beer garden, especially late at night, EDDC's Environmental Health Officers have been proactive in trying to anticipate and prevent new noise problems from occurring where none existed previously.

Officers were optimistic that education was better than enforcement and drew up a strategy with Licensing Officers to tackle potential problems at source before they occurred. They arranged and carried out a series of briefings and presentations for the District's Licensed Victuallers Associations and for Members of the Council highlighting the legitimate fears of many residents of continuing to live in their own homes but now with the prospect of outside smoking and drinking - and with extended opening hours.

As a result of their innovative approach, EDDC's Environmental Health Service was presented with the John Connell Enterprise Award, which was accepted on behalf of the Council at the House of Commons on Wednesday 5 November 2008, by Council Chairman Councillor Paul Diviani.

The judges were very impressed by the Council's dedication with regard to the continuing improvements to its noise service, and to its efforts of working with other organisations, in order to protect members of the public and at the same time showing fairness in the execution of its duty.