

## **Council news round-up October/November/December 2009**



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)

### **Challenge for next year is to deliver services within even tighter budgets**

If proof were needed that no-one is immune from the effects of the recession, the harsh reality has already started making itself felt at East Devon District Council. Reduced income from fees and charges, plus low interest rates, have combined with increased costs in some areas to give the Council a stiff challenge for the year ahead. Car park income is down, as are receipts for planning and building control fees and land charges. Investment income has dropped and the commitment to improved recycling and waste collections means extra spending in this area for some years to come.

The Council's finance experts are looking at making savings where possible for the remaining months of the current financial year. Meanwhile, officers are working with Members, and with our "Speak Now" panel of public representatives, to work out how the Council's services can be delivered more cost-effectively in the years ahead.

The budget-setting and service planning process for 2010-11 started some months ago, but there's a long way to go before a clear picture emerges of what savings can be made, how income might be increased and what the impact on overall service provision will be.

On 10 December, EDDC held a consultation session with representatives of the district's seven towns, designed to share the financial challenges affecting front-line service delivery and to invite their comments. The towns could feel the impact of some of the proposed savings more than the rural areas. This meeting was part of EDDC's ongoing commitment to engage with town and parish representatives. The meeting on 10 December was arranged to address specific budgetary issues.

Throughout the summer, the Leader's Service Transformation Group has been looking at the way EDDC is organised and considering whether this could be improved to meet the combined challenges of maintaining customer satisfaction, facing up to climate change and surviving the recession. EDDC is also looking at the possible benefits of shared working with other authorities – both town councils and other districts. Last week, EDDC announced it would be sharing its Director of Economic Development and Planning, Karime Hassan – with Exeter City Council on an interim basis when the city's director retires in April 2010.

In the New Year, Members will meet to consider the findings of the budget-setting exercise and the financial forecasts. From their discussions will emerge two results:

- Setting a budget for the year ahead
- Shaping the Council to best fit the challenges in the years to follow

Residents will be able to follow the progress of the budget-setting process over the coming months through the local media and on EDDC's popular news website at: <http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/>

## **Boundary Committee publishes advice on unitary local government in Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk**

The independent Boundary Committee for England has published its advice on unitary local government in Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk. The advice, in response to a request from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in February 2008, looks at whether there could be any alternative proposals for unitary local government in the three counties that could have the capacity to meet five criteria set out by the Government.

- ❑ **In Devon, the Committee has put forward a single unitary council for the current Devon county area.**
- ❑ In Norfolk, the Committee has put forward a single unitary council for the whole of Norfolk.
- ❑ In Suffolk, the Committee has made two proposals: a unitary county of Suffolk (the Committee's preferred alternative proposal for Suffolk); and a two-unitary pattern comprising an Ipswich & Felixstowe authority and a Rural Suffolk authority.

These are proposals that are **alternative to the original bids for unitary status made by Exeter City Council**, Norwich City Council and Ipswich City Council, originally made in 2007. The Committee has **recommended that all of these original bids are not implemented**.

Max Caller, Chair of the Boundary Committee for England, said: "Our role in this process has been to provide independent advice to the Government, not to decide what will happen. We are setting out today those patterns of unitary local government that, in our view and based on the extensive evidence we've seen and heard, have the capacity to best meet the criteria that the Secretary of State has set. The sheer scale of evidence we've seen and heard from local people and groups in the county reinforces the view that local government is as diverse as the people it serves. We heard strong views from those who want to keep the current system, and we make no criticism of the people working hard to deliver services that people rely on. It's also clear that there is no decisive consensus either way."

"But in deciding our advice we were ultimately persuaded by the broad cross section of people and groups who told us that there were patterns of unitary local government that are able to deliver more affordable services with clear strategic leadership and can empower local towns and villages to get more out of the services they use. The process has taken a long time to get right, but we wouldn't have continued working if we didn't think that our advice could provide opportunities for real changes that can improve people's lives by making the services they use more effective and efficient. It is now up to the Secretary of State to take a decision on whether to implement the alternative proposals that we are making to him."

Now that the Committee has provided its advice, it is up to the Secretary of State to take a decision on whether:

- ❑ to implement the original (that is Norwich City Council/Exeter City Council/Ipswich Borough Council) proposal, with or without modification
- ❑ to implement the Committee's alternative proposal, with or without modification
- ❑ take no action

Councillor Sara Randall Johnson, Leader of EDDC, said:

"The only thing more surprising than the ridiculous single Devon unitary proposal is the period of time that the public will have to comment – 6 weeks, to include the distraction of the Christmas and New Year holidays. We have argued all along that a massive council covering all the disparate parts of Devon, an area four times the size of Greater London, would be unwieldy and undemocratic."

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has stated that anyone who wishes to make representations on any unitary proposal that he is considering, or on any matters connected with it, can do so **by 19 January 2010**. All such representations should be made in writing and sent to: [DevonStructures@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:DevonStructures@communities.gsi.gov.uk)

## **Comprehensive Area Assessment**

The latest Audit Commission assessment, published on 7 December 2009, was run under new rules, and looked at Devon as “one place” and assessed the overall performance of the county’s public sector authorities in the key areas affecting people’s lives – the environment, climate change, law and order, economy and employment, and housing. Overall, the county council, its district partners and the Police and Fire authorities got two “green flags” to reflect their overall performance, which is ‘Good’. The Audit Commission’s report is based on checks made in the year ending 31 March 2009.

Over the same period, the Audit Commission’s independent assessors also drill down deeper to assess the individual performance of councils in terms of managing performance, use of resources, managing finances and governance.

EDDC’s score, based on its performance up to 31 March this year, is ‘At Standard’. There is praise for the Council’s work in making the area a clean place to live, tackling homelessness, boosting the local economy and helping people, particularly youngsters, to live healthier lives. Satisfaction among people living in EDDC’s council homes is among the best in England.

The Audit Commission also recognises that EDDC is prudent with its financial resources and is a good employer. The Council sets low council tax and looks after its money carefully, say the independent assessors. Local people’s satisfaction with the Council is higher than in most other areas.

Among the areas where the assessors are more critical are – ironically – recycling and housing. This reflects the fact that EDDC has made recent progress in both these areas, but this was too late to be included in the 2008-09 assessment.

The report says the Council fell short of its targets for providing affordable homes, but adds that “performance is set to improve” in the coming (current) year. In the same way, EDDC’s performance on recycling was below average when the assessors visited, but since April the 2008 and 2009 improvements have kicked in, raising recycling rates overall by 21%. In the two parts of the district where weekly food and dry recycling collections are made, the typical recycling rate is now around 50%, while landfill volumes are tumbling. Over 24 tonnes of food waste is recycled every Monday and Tuesday. Food waste is used to generate electricity for the National Grid.

On affordable housing, EDDC is also making big strides. The Council is matching a £1 million Government grant and is pressing ahead with 17 new council homes. At Axminster, 12 new affordable homes are being built, with two bungalows for local people with disabilities being constructed at Sidmouth.

## **Bogus ‘Council’ callers strike twice**

East Devon residents are being urged to beware of bogus telephone callers, posing as council officers, operating in the area. EDDC has discovered that residents here are being targeted, after news of a similar scam in North Devon and Torridge. In each case, the caller claimed to be from the council, saying that the individual may be eligible for a reimbursement of Council Tax.

Two cases have so far been reported by council customers in East Devon – at Exmouth and Sidmouth. Already knowing the name and address of the victim’s bank, the caller asked for the three-digit credit card security code number before explaining they would be sent a form to complete, to process the claim. Both residents became suspicious and ended the call without divulging the security number.

Councillor Andrew Moulding, EDDC Portfolio Holder Resources, says: “If you are contacted by someone that you are unsure about, please don’t be tricked under any circumstances. Officers at EDDC do telephone customers, but would never ask them for a credit card security number over the telephone. If you are in any doubt, finish the call straight away”.

Nick Farrell, East & Mid Devon Crime Prevention Officer, says: "I am aware of a couple of isolated incidents where attempts to obtain personal information have been made via the telephone. Thankfully, nobody so far has been duped. It is reassuring to see that a vast majority of the public are now much more vigilant when it comes to cold callers and do not divulge private information. I also urge people to consider shredding items such as bank statements or other documents that contain private information prior to disposal, as these are often used by fraudsters to obtain credit or clone your identity. So far as the majority of phone and email scams are concerned, the best rule of thumb is: If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is!"

Residents are urged to report any suspect calls to the EDDC's Customer Services and Revenues Manager, Libby Jarrett, on 01395 517 446 or email [revenues@eastdevon.gov.uk](mailto:revenues@eastdevon.gov.uk). You can also call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

### **Basic services in rural areas**

The Community and Social Enterprise Fund has funding available to support projects from not-for-profit organisations including parish councils. Grants must be used to directly support the delivery of basic services in rural areas. These can be things like childcare, retail services or renewable energy projects. It is expected the majority of funding for each project will be provided by other sources. For more information: [www.sw-ruralgateway.info/getting/social-enterprise-1.shtm](http://www.sw-ruralgateway.info/getting/social-enterprise-1.shtm) or phone 07733 264756.

### **Broadband**

The South West RDA has funding available to spend on pilot projects that will lead to improved broadband access for rural business and communities in the region. Ideas are now being sought for a limited number of pilot projects that will provide high speed broadband access for rural areas that are losing out in broadband coverage. The closing date for applications is **15 January 2010**. For more information: [www.sw-ruralgateway.info/getting/broadband-for-rural-1.shtm](http://www.sw-ruralgateway.info/getting/broadband-for-rural-1.shtm)

### **Repairs**

Bovril has grants of £20,000 available to small projects that repair outdoor facilities. For example a dishevelled stone wall, a broken stile on a nature trail or a campsite in need of repair. Buy a promotional jar of Bovril to nominate a project. Projects can be nominated up to **28 February 2010**. For more information: [www.bovril.co.uk/revival](http://www.bovril.co.uk/revival). You can also vote for which projects should be supported on the same website!

### **Making it local scheme**

Small businesses in East Devon and the Blackdown Hills are being offered grants by the Making it Local Scheme. Amounts of between £1,000 and £10,000 are available for projects focusing on small business creation and growth, strengthening local communities and connecting people and the landscape. The funding is for different kinds of businesses and organisations, including private businesses and sole traders, social and community enterprises, Parish and Town Councils, voluntary groups, local community groups, charities and collaborative groups. A wide range of projects could be eligible for funding including: local village services; renewable power for a small community; training support for small businesses. The first deadline for applications is **18 January 2010**.

The Small Grants Fund will support projects that focus on either:

- Small business creation and growth
- Strengthening local communities
- Connecting people and the landscape

Six projects have so far been offered funding:

1. Digital Mentors - providing ICT support to local businesses, organisations and individuals through a network of ICT experts.

2. Pilot Forestry Apprenticeships Programme – creating five two-year forestry apprenticeships in the local area. East Budleigh Community Shop - improving local produce display facilities and promotion.
3. Building Sustainable Business Networks - improving local business skills through business networks, classes and individual training sessions.
4. Working Our Woodlands - improving the woodland economic resource in the project area by developing woodland networks, quality standards and improving the supply of local wood to local markets.
5. The Otter Brewery Interpretation Centre - building a new interpretation centre in order to engage with a wider range of businesses and communities.

If you would like to find out more please contact Jenny Archard, Programme Manager, on 01823 680626 or e-mail [jenny.archard@devon.gov.uk](mailto:jenny.archard@devon.gov.uk) or visit: [www.makingitlocal.org](http://www.makingitlocal.org).

If you would like to get involved with Making it Local, you could train to become a volunteer project appraiser on 28 January 2010 or attend the Spring Update Event on 29 April 2010. Email [makingitlocal@devon.gov.uk](mailto:makingitlocal@devon.gov.uk) for further details.

### **Tree planting**

The Tree Council has funding available for community groups, including Parish and Town Councils, throughout the UK proposing to undertake well-planned tree planting projects starting in National Tree Week which usually takes place in November or December each year. The deadline for applications is **31 May 2010**. For more information visit: [www.treecouncil.org.uk](http://www.treecouncil.org.uk) or phone 020 7407 9992

### **The work of the Standards Committee in 2009**

At EDDC's Council meeting on 9 December 2009, Ted Butt, Independent Chairman of the Standards Committee spoke on behalf of the Committee. The following is a copy of his speech:

“As part of the Committee's drive to promote ethical and transparent Government in East Devon, I wish to report you on the work of the Standards Committee during the past twelve months. With the media and public focusing on MPs' expenses during the summer, the scrutiny of elected representatives has been put into the spotlight. It is most important that the work of Local Councillors is both ethical and transparent as it is now under closer scrutiny than ever before.

2009 has been the busiest year yet for the Standards Committee after taking over the assessment of complaints locally. The procedures and assessment criteria have been developed and reviewed to provide an effective but efficient service. The majority of councillors will never find themselves subject to a complaint or investigation, but for the small number of cases where there is cause for concern, the Committee will aim to deal with the allegations quickly and efficiently. We have dealt with 15 complaints during this past year. Three of these cases have so far resulted in further investigation and we have, in fact, just received the first request for the review of a decision.

A large number of complaints this year, against Parish and District Members, have involved planning issues. It is important that Members learn from these cases. Many complaints have concerned the basic issues of transparency of decision making, respect for speakers by committee members and prejudicial interests when dealing with planning applications. In many cases, Members have pleaded ignorance to any wrongdoing. This is simply not acceptable. Members must make themselves aware of the Code of Conduct and remind themselves of the rules and guidance on declarations of interest. When a clear interest arises, Members must declare them at the earliest opportunity and withdraw from the meeting in question if that interest is of sufficient strength to be prejudicial. They may, of course, still present their views to the committee if the public are permitted to do so, but members with a prejudicial interest cannot engage in the debate or the vote, but must instead leave the room. It is no longer a defence to simply declare that 'I didn't realise.'

Several training and briefing sessions have since been held on tackling planning issues raised by complainants to your Standards Committee and I understand that these were well attended. They should hopefully help Members in future deliberations. Other action was also taken following the consideration of various planning complaints resulting in changes to the processes involved when dealing with planning applications within the Council.

The Probity in Planning guidance brought before you this evening should also help Members in balancing the needs and interests of individuals and the community, with the need to maintain transparent decision-making. I urge you to support and adopt this document. We must not only ensure that our decision-making about planning matters is ethical and transparent but is *seen* by the public to be exactly that. The public must have confidence in the system.

Several cases this year have also highlighted Members individual behaviour at meetings. Whilst not going into detail about the relevant cases, it is important for me to remind members of one of the General Principles of the Code:

*‘Respect for Others*

Members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers, and its other employees.’

I am sure that elected members never set out to offend or indeed disrespect anyone but it is important to realise that what *you* may consider to be a harmless quip or joke may well be construed as offensive by individual members of the public. Also, your line of questioning must be relevant and equitable to all parties so that all sides feel they have been heard and all views taken into account.

The Standards Committee does not exist simply to deal with the complaints against Councillors. We are working closely with Ann Liverton, the Member Champion for Member Development to help progress the development programme to help new Members understand the Code of Conduct more easily. The Standards Committee wants to be more proactive and help Members to avoid having complaints made against them in the first place. We will be publishing a quarterly update in the Council's newsletter, *The Knowledge*, which will detail the work of the Committee and any new guidance published. We will also be adding a new web page to the Council's website showing and promoting the work of the Committee. If there is any other way in which you feel we could support you in the ethical agenda, then please let me know and I will feed your ideas into the working group the Standards Committee has set up to develop good practice in raising standards in East Devon.

Finally, I'd like to finish by reminding Members of the General Principle of the Code of Conduct which sums up not only the work of the Standards Committee but the work that the Council should be striving to achieve:

*‘Leadership*

Members should promote and support the principles by leadership, and by example, and should act in a way that secures or preserves public confidence.’

If we are to serve the public and to prove that we can govern effectively at local level we should aspire to this idea. Public confidence in the way the authority functions is key to the whole idea of Local Government, and I would like to support you in this.”