

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 23 September 2009

Present:

Councillors:

Ray Bloxham (Chairman)
Bob Peachey (Vice-Chairman)

Iain Chubb
Trevor Cope
Christine Drew
Roger Giles
Graham Godbeer
Steve Hall

Jim Knight
Frances Newth
Marion Olive
Helen Parr
Graham Troman
Steve Wragg

Officers:

Peter Jeffs – Corporate Director
Diccon Pearse – Corporate Director
Debbie Meakin – Democratic Services Officer

Also Present

Councillors:

Vivienne Ash
Graham Brown
David Cox
Paul Diviani
Stuart Hughes

Ann Liverton
Andrew Moulding
Ken Potter
Phillip Skinner
Pauline Stott

Apologies:

David Atkins
Chris Gibbings
David Key
Eileen Wragg
Stephanie Jones
Jill Elson

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 8.20pm.

***9 Public question time**

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

***10 Town and Parish website and e-mail addresses**

The Chairman brought this item forward, in order to prevent detaining Mark Snell from ICT and Cllr Philip Skinner during the other items on the agenda that would need considerable debate.

A paper was tabled containing statistics about the current e-mail capability in relation to broadband speed and the different addresses used. The issue had been raised by the Communications Think Tank as an area of concern, in particular relating to the use of electronic communications for emergency purposes.

***10 Town and Parish website and e-mail addresses (continued)**

As Rural Champion, Councillor Skinner had commissioned some research into the current e-mail capability of the towns and parishes, and the costs of changing over to a uniform “.gov.uk” suffix. He sought, on behalf of the Communications Think Tank, the approval of the Committee of the principle of uniform addresses before approaching the towns and parishes for their thoughts.

The proposal was to achieve a published e-mail address that could be easily predicted with the .gov.uk suffix. Such addresses could only be registered by bodies associated with local and national government in the UK, and would cost around £43 per annum per domain. The benefits included a professional look, as opposed to the often personal computer e-mail addresses that varied widely; and a higher level of security, a point endorsed by the Member Champion for Data Quality, Councillor Troman. The Chairman also shared with the Committee comments from the Member Champion for Community Safety, Councillor Gibbings. He raised the issue of contacting clerks via e-mail by the emergency services in the event of an incident, which would be easier to undertake with a uniform address.

Members discussed the concept of uniform e-mail and website addresses, raising a number of concerns that needed to clarification before approaching the towns and parishes for their views:

- £43 per annum per domain name would be too high a cost for many of the smaller, rural parishes where budget was very limited; the parishes may feel the money was better spent on other resources for the parish.
- Many of the Towns and some of the parishes had established suitable addresses with the .gov.uk suffix. Members were concerned that the proposal asked for changes in existing addresses that did not meet the suggested first part of the e-mail address, and the implications of changing letter heads and re-registering new domain names.
- Political associations with the .gov.uk suffix could mean that some parishes, who considered themselves non-political, would object to any such association.
- Increased security was important as many current clerk e-mail addresses were relating to their family e-mail accounts.

In answer to questions from Members, Mark Snell confirmed that it was possible to register two domains, one for towns and one for parishes, which could each have multiple e-mail addresses. This would reduce the cost per annum considerably; however there were strict rules in using the .gov.uk suffix.

Mark also confirmed that such e-mail addresses could be set up to automatically forward, or “point” to any existing address set up; this would mean that existing addresses would not need to be scrapped or changed, and any changes of clerk could be easily dealt with in switching the pointer to the new clerk’s own address.

Members were in agreement with the principle of uniform e-mail addresses and websites, provided that the costs and technical concerns of forwarding were clearly explained to the Towns and Parishes; with the final decision resting with the Town or Parish itself.

RESOLVED

1. that the Rural Areas Champion, working with Mark Snell of ICT, produce display boards and give a presentation to the forthcoming Annual Meetings of the Towns and Parishes to ask for their views; taking into account options of costs and technical explanation of forwarding;
2. that the paper circulated on the proposal be amended as per debated, and circulated to the Towns and Parishes prior to the Annual Meetings.

*11 **Comprehensive Area Assessment**

The Chairman outlined to Members unsuccessful efforts to get Martin Green, CAA Lead from the Audit Commission, to be present at the Committee to answer questions. As an alternative, a meeting had been arranged to meet with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman and officers; which later became an arranged conference call at Mr Green's request. However, this call did not materialise with no explanation given.

The Chairman expressed his strong disappointment at lack of assistance from the CAA Lead. The purpose of meeting with Mr Green was to establish what exactly the Council needed to undertake in order to be prepared for CAA, including what the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees had to play in providing evidence for the assessment.

The Chairman also shared with Members an extract of the first part of a CAA report that highlighted the very low level of affordable housing built in the District in the past year.

Councillor Potter, Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee, also spoke on his disappointment with the service provided by the Audit Commission, including their role in appointing an auditor, imposing a code of practice and setting the audit fees, which in the current year would be £133,000.00.

Councillor Mrs Parr highlighted some of her research where a press release by the Local Government Association and Councillor comments published elsewhere in the country had expressed their dissatisfaction with the Audit Commission, some even questioning the longevity of CAA.

Diccon Pearse, Corporate Director, recounted to Members recent difficulties in obtaining an accurate scoring for a Benefits Inspection by the Commission; he also updated Members on a recent draft assessment that bore no reflection of the current Council position. Although Martin Green had agreed to discuss the report further with officers, he had made it clear that he still intended to publish the report on 19 October 2009 with a score. This published report would come before the Committee, and Members would need to debate what next steps to take based on that scoring.

Councillor Moulding, Portfolio Holder for Resources, welcomed the resolve of the Committee to look into the requirements of the CAA process, as he too had found the documentation published by the Audit Commission vague and lacking precise detail of what evidence was required.

RESOLVED

1. that the Chairman, with advice from officers, write to the Audit Commission expressing the disappointment of the Committee at the lack of advice which had repeatedly been sought;
2. that if no response is received from the Audit Commission, the Chairman to consider wider publication of the lack of advice.

12 **Health and Health Equality Policy**

The Chairman outlined a number of local and national considerations relating to Health, including the current review by the Devon PCT which would be scrutinised by the Health Scrutiny Committee at Devon County Council; the Rural Health Strategy; the Rural Services Network Manifesto; and recent government proposals to axe GP boundaries. The topic of health was one that could not be covered in one meeting by the Committee, and therefore he proposed that the policy represented by Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director, was the first step in answering the question: How far does the Council want to be involved in providing health care with its partners?

12 **Health and Health Equality Policy (continued)**

Peter Jeffs outlined the purpose of the policy, stressing that the Council had a huge impact, both directly and indirectly, on the health and well-being of the District, through setting the social, environmental and economic context of the area. Members had a role, as community leaders, to hold health agencies to account; this policy also looked to how best to compliment the service provided by those agencies, for the benefit of the community.

The policy also had strong links with the Comprehensive Area Assessment, in evaluating how well the Council worked with its partners to benefit the community.

Members felt that the policy was an excellent step towards clarifying their position with health issues. Many Members expressed how important the well-being of the community was, that self worth went a long way to keeping a community healthy.

Cllr Mrs Drew, as the East Devon representative on the County Council Health Scrutiny Committee, outlined her work on that Committee in assessing the recent PCT review, which, when concluded, she would report to the Co-ordinating Committee. She thanked Peter Jeffs for his clear policy, which was a positive step for the Council to take.

Members outlined in debate:

- the need to recognise the benefits from leisure and cultural activities for the well being of the community;
- the importance of considering the well-being of the elected member;
- setting in planning policy the need to take into account its impact on the health of the community and the ability of the health agencies to provide care to increasing communities;
- costs of leisure activities being prohibitive to low income families;
- relaxed policy on the use of communal land for council tenants, which enabled some to use that land for horticultural purposes.

Members felt that the statistical information set out in Appendix 2 of the report did not reflect the true picture of the District; some minor changes to the wording of the policy were also discussed.

RECOMMENDED

1. that the specific policy areas set out below, as per the Health and Health Equality Policy, be agreed in principle:
 - 1.1 Work with health partners in delivering the locally relevant parts of the Local Area Agreement;
 - 1.2 Maintain links with PCT, GP consortia and other health groups providing Council representation on these groups when requested and appropriate;
 - 1.3 Advocate for East Devon's local health issues to other partners and agencies;
 - 1.4 Advocate for the health needs of rural populations (especially access issues) with partners and other agencies;
 - 1.5 Scrutinise the changing local and national health needs, and the priorities and activities of other health providers (including changes to the level of service). Develop the Health Equalities aspect of the Environmental Health & Health Equalities Service and maintain regional and national links through their Corporate Director

12 **Health and Health Equality Policy (continued)**

RECOMMENDED

- 1.6 Promote social and environmental health issues to local communities and continue Council actions to do this. Use our in-house publicity to assist in information provision;
- 1.7 Promote positive mental health both within the Council and in our communities;
- 1.8 Exercise our range of regulatory functions for public health;
- 1.9 Make direct provision for health, and healthy activity, when this complements (but does not duplicate or override) the role of other agencies, and where it is permitted by budgets and priorities;
- 1.10 Assess the health impact of major new developments, and ensure that the wider aspects of health are recognised in the development framework and policy;
- 1.11 Assist in consultation (with other agencies) to establish the wider health priorities of our local communities and (working alongside our Equalities and Diversity activity) seek to better ensure Health Equalities across all parts of our community.

1. that the Health and Health Equality Policy, subject to minor amendments, be approved.

*13 **Minutes from the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Councillor Chubb outlined the extensive work undertaken from the Business Tenants Survey, including his own personal research into the units based at Axminster. Councillor Cope recommended the survey to all Councillors to consider.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

*14 **Minutes from the Service Delivery and Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Service Delivery and Performance Committee meeting was scheduled for the following evening, 24 September 2009. Councillor Steve Hall thanked the Chairman for permitting the change of date of meeting and reported that there was a very full agenda to be considered. The minutes from that meeting would be circulated to the Members of the Co-ordinating Committee in due course.

*15 **Minutes from the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Councillor Mrs Parr advised Members of the proposed departure policy to facilitate much needed affordable housing. The Development Management Committee had received the recommendations of the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, agreeing to a consultation period on the policy before further debate took place. The draft policy had also been presented to the recent Housing Summit held at the Council Offices, which had been well attended.

*15 **Minutes from the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (cont.)**

Cllr Mrs Newth, Member Champion for Sustainability, reported that the recent work by her working party would be reported to a future meeting of the Communities Committee.

Cllr Diviani, Chairman of Development Management Committee, reported that the Former Gas Works site in Exmouth, was coming forward as a viable site following some changes to the legal agreement.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

*16 **Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee Forward Plan**

The Chairman informed Members of the scheduled meeting of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees on 25 September 2009 to discuss the future workload of the Committees. This would influence the current forward plan.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

Chairman Date.....