

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 5 December 2007

Present:

Councillors:

A R Giles (Chairman)
J A Knight (Vice Chairman)

D Chapman
Mrs C E Drew
D R H Hull
S C Luxton
Mrs F I Newth

K D Nicholas
B Nicholson
Mrs M A Rogers
G M Troman

Also Present

Councillors:

Miss V Ash
P Bowden
T A Cope
D Cox
A J Dinnis
R G Franklin

J P Halse
S Hughes
A T Moulding
A W J Reed
C Tratt

Apologies:

Councillors:

Miss J M Elson
H J Jeffery
G K Liverton
Mrs P A Stott
Mrs E E Wragg

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 8.50pm

*42 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 7 November 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

*43 Poltimore House – progress report

Members considered the report of the Principal Conservation Officer on progress with Poltimore House restoration and details of the feasibility study produced. Some Members had been given a tour of parts of Poltimore House and surrounding grounds before the meeting.

Alan Payne, Chairman of the Poltimore House Trust, made a brief presentation to update Members on the progression of ideas for uses of the site. Since his position statement made to Members (provided in agenda papers pages 7 and 8), two new trustees had been appointed who had expertise in academic institutions and in European funding. These two trustees were researching the viability of a heritage construction and restoration learning centre, along the lines of a similar establishment just outside Stroud. Mr Payne explained that the end use of the site would be likely to comprise flats and holiday lets; offices; conference facilities; workshops and the facility for the construction learning centre.

***43 Poltimore House – progress report** (continued)

Keith Weedon, Trustee and Vice Chairman of the Friends of Poltimore House, spoke briefly on the income received in the past year. This consisted of £12,000 in money and the same amount received “in kind” in the form of free labour and donation of some materials. The Trust was re-investing money received in security for the site; purchase of materials and for repayments towards loans. Fundraising events and possible generators of income were also explained to Members.

Members put questions to Mr Payne and Mr Weedon to establish financial detail as set out here:

- The overall costs of capital and the expected revenue was requested. The full restoration was currently estimated to be £10M; current revenue covered running costs but the Trust did not produce precise financial detail on running costs.
- There were no other funding commitments in terms of proposed income
- The Trust explained the two mortgages on the site; they have paid £2,000 towards the second mortgage of £15,000 but could not give a final date for when the mortgage and interest accrued would be paid in full.
- The Trust is made up of 7 Trustees; the Friends of Poltimore House membership has exceeded 400. Membership is £15 for family membership a year and £10 for single membership a year. Comment was made that this seemed a small amount which could potentially be increased to raise more income; however the counter argument made by the Poltimore representatives was that the charge was felt reasonable as many “Friends” were pensioners. They were considering commercial membership, however, and this could be charged at a higher rate.
- Members questioned the potential revenue for grazing or other related use of the surrounding grounds. The Trust explained that there were no grazing rights on the area as such; and that it would be impracticable due to extensive fencing required to keep stock away from the historic gardens. Drainage was an issue which lent itself more to a wetlands habitat than grazing area. The grass “arena” area had the potential to be used for weddings and for small concerts.

Members were keen to establish more precisely when some of the restoration would be complete. This would then enable some parts of the site to be used and therefore quickly establish a higher level of income. The Trust explained that the outbuildings could be restored to use in two years subject to money being available; and the principal state rooms in a few years.

The Chairman raised the issue of the Project Officer. The Trust made it clear that although the Project Officer was key to the project, this was going to be put on hold until the two new trustees had completed further work on the viability of the construction learning centre. Members were in support of the project in general, but agreed that the conditions of the loan had to be met, specifically in terms of the 10 year plan, in order to protect the Council’s interests.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources explained the Council’s main objective at the time of the approval of the loan. The main objective was to protect the fabric of the building on an on-going basis. He proposed that this should include a detailed risk assessment, and from that assessment, how each of the areas identified should be secured financially. This should include a comprehensive survey of the building so that the level of detail showed where the risks lay in the fabric of the building. The Corporate Director responsible for Scrutiny added to this that the 10 year plan was needed, with detail on the Project Officer being appointed and put in place; and when the steps of restoration would be achieved.

Cllr T A Cope explained that he no longer had a personal or prejudicial interest to declare on this item.

- RECOMMENDED**
1. that the Trustees complete a full risk assessment, including a comprehensive survey of the site, and report back to Scrutiny Committee with detail on each risk identified and how each would be financially managed;
 2. that the Trustees complete a 10 year plan of the project with sufficient detail to cover the role of the Project Officer, and the expected dates for the stages of restoration to be completed, to be reported back to Scrutiny Committee.

The Chairman thanked the Poltimore House Trust representatives and noted the invitation to tour the site by appointment which the Trust has extended to all Members.

*44 **Single set of National Indicators**

Members considered the Policy Manager's report on the announcement from the Government that a single set of national indicators for public bodies would be introduced from April next year. An examination of the 198 national indicators revealed that many of the indicators do not apply directly to a district council but apply to other local bodies such as a county council and the police or jointly to several agencies. Nevertheless, the Council will have to plan for measuring those indicators which are new or changed and apply to district councils. There was clearly now a shift away from specific service requirements, moving towards how residents perceive their area.

The Executive Board had considered this matter on 31 October and agreed that the Scrutiny Committee be asked to consider the implications for the Council of the single set of national indicators. On 9 November the Government published the technical definitions of the 198 national indicators for consultation in a 438 page document. This revealed that the Council would be affected directly or indirectly by up to 68 of the national indicators which were listed at the end of the report. The list showed which of the indicators would be the responsibility of the Council and which would have to be carried out in partnership with other authorities.

Members were asked to comment generally on the indicators and the following points were noted:

- The questions used in the General Survey were discussed as to how reputable they were as a means of correctly measuring perception. Were they worded correctly in order to get the output required?
- The rise in the number of indicators in relation to Environmental Health and Community Safety was attributed to the Government's agenda to focus on climate change and anti-social behaviour.
- Concern was raised over survey fatigue and the compatibility issue with other areas nationally; clearly there can be no one size fits all solution to cover both a mainly rural area with that of a metropolitan makeup. Who will be setting the targets for these proposed indicators; are targets set nationally or by the local authority?
- Use of perceptions was open to interpretation and could be misleading to individuals asked; individuals could also be positively or negatively influenced by the media and therefore the concern here was about a lack of objectivity.
- There would still be up to 35 local indicators that would cover issues that are relevant to the area. These indicators would be managed by the Local Area Agreement.

***44 Single set of National Indicators** (continued)

The Corporate Director advised Members that the planned presentation to Full Council on the 12 December 2007 would show some of the results of the last General Survey in more detail as well as how performance management using the national indicators can help the Council in its efforts to become more customer focused.

RESOLVED

that the Executive Board be made aware of the Scrutiny Committee's concern on the proposed new indicators as follows:

- Compatibility with other areas where there are differences in community makeup
- Lack of objectivity when using terms like "perception" as this would be both misleading and adversely influenced by the media
- Acceptance that assessment would now have to be made along with our partners to cover our area, moving away from indicators that are only specific to the District Council.

***45 Future of Scrutiny**

The Chairman expressed to Members of the Committee that as well as the scrutiny function being to act as the "critical friend" to the Executive Board, members could set their own agenda and invited ideas from both the Committee and other members in attendance.

The principal ideas put forward were:

- Hold future meetings at other venues in order to encourage the public and press to attend meetings, and therefore engage the community more;
- Any visits to other venues or establishments should always be notified to the local Ward Member(s);
- Invite Portfolio Holders for questioning on issues as they arise;
- Focus on issues raised by the public such as street cleaning and the housing allocation system, to better enable members to have an understanding of the processes involved;
- Widen the current role of performance monitoring to include how the Council's partners were performing to meet the Council's priorities, in line with the proposed new performance indicators
- Change agenda format to make them more interesting which in turn should promote public interest
- Promote items of interest to the Press through the Communications Officer
- Invite more diverse representatives to speak at meetings
- Theme each meeting where possible – for example on a service, or linked items

Members were advised that this was an ongoing process, and that any further ideas should be sent to the Chairman. Portfolio Holders were thanked for their regular attendance to Scrutiny Committee and the Chairman expressed his appreciation of their attendance.

*45 **Future of Scrutiny** (continued)

RESOLVED

1. that the appropriate Portfolio Holder and Member Champion be invited to attend Scrutiny Committee based on the issue(s) on the agenda
2. that the current performance monitoring be widened to include the Council's partners performance in meeting the Council's priorities
3. that a more diverse range of representatives be invited to speak on items on the agenda
4. that future meetings be themed where possible to link together similar items

*46 **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Members considered the Forward Plan for the Scrutiny Committee.

The Vice-Chairman asked for the Britain in Bloom Committees to be informed of the forthcoming report to the 6 February 2008 meeting.

Members discussed the budget process and the Corporate Director responsible for Scrutiny explained that both the budgets and service plans would be fully reviewed during a one day Task and Finish Forum (TaFF) made up of both Scrutiny and Overview members on the 10 January 2008. Members were in agreement to appoint three members for this Task and Finish Forum; the Vice-Chairman volunteered as one of the three. Members were also in agreement to review the whole budget process, which should be added to the Forward Plan. Members of the Committee would be invited by e-mail to volunteer for the remaining two places on the TaFF.

Suggestions were made by Members to include other areas of work on the Forward Plan in due course:

- A review of the leisure centres now under Leisure East Devon (LED), with a tour of the centres to establish how LED is performing, including information on usage and capital needs for future upgrades or improvements
- To review how civil parking (where the previous responsibility of the Police is now the responsibility of the County Council) will impact on the District Council and its partnership working
- Work still had to be done in deciding what questions the Chairman would pose to the Chairman of the Devon Primary Care Trust at a future Executive Board meeting (date yet to be agreed)
- The existing noted item (5) on youth representatives attending Scrutiny Committee needed more work to get information compiled in a way that younger people could understand whilst also covering the role that Scrutiny had to play; and that other representatives should also be invited. The newly appointed Champion for Young People was already a Member of the Scrutiny Committee.

*46 **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan** (continued)

RESOLVED

1. that the Britain in Bloom Committees be informed and representatives invited to the 6 February 2008 meeting for the Britain in Bloom item; and that the press be actively encouraged to attend.
2. that the following changes be made to the Forward Plan for Scrutiny Committee:
 - a) Add a review of the Budget process
 - b) Add a review of the Leisure Centres
 - c) Add a review of the impact of civil parking as a priority
 - d) Remove the item on Concessionary Fares as this was no longer relevant
 - e) Invite representatives, such as Youth Workers from both the County Council and the Police, young people representatives and Cllr Jill Elson to attend a future meeting on engaging younger people with the work of Scrutiny.

*47 **Task and Finish Forum Status Report**

Members noted the Task and Finish Forum Status report which presented details of the current Task and Finish Forums.

The Corporate Director responsible for Scrutiny reported that there was a service review of the Planning service due to start in the New Year and that she was keen for the TaFF on Planning to work with this review.

RESOLVED

- 1) that the Task and Finish Forum Status Report be noted;
- 2) that a start date for the TaFF on Planning be tied in with the planned Service Review.

*48 **Service Planning Reporting**

The Corporate Director responsible for Scrutiny reported back following some questions raised at an earlier meeting on the 7 November 2007 relating to the item on Quarterly monitoring of service plans – second quarter 2007/08:

- “Benefits in Kind” was the term used for dispensations to members and officers where normally the cost would be subject to tax, but where there is an agreed dispensation not to add tax.
- The highlighted red section in the Audit Service Plan relating to the risk register was probably misleading as it gave the impression that the risk register was not reviewed often enough. Whilst the register as a whole was not reviewed annually, each item within it was reviewed as it came up in the audit work plan.

Chairman

Date.....