

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 6 February 2008

Present:

Councillors:

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

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

B Nicholson
Mrs M A Rogers
P J Skinner
G M Troman

Officers:

Peter Jeffs – Corporate Director
Kate Little – Head of Planning and Countryside
Denise Lyon – Corporate Director
Chris Powell – Head of ICT
Mark Reilly – Head of Streetscene
Debbie Meakin – Democratic Services Officer

Also Present

Councillors:

P Bowden
T Cope
D Cox
P Diviani
Miss J Elson
R G Franklin

S Hughes
Mrs S Jones
Mrs A Liverton
G K Liverton
A T Moulding
A W J Reed
Mrs P Stott

Apologies:

Councillors:

Mrs V Duval-Steer
H J Jeffery
S C Luxton
K D Nicholas
Mrs E E Wragg

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 8.50pm

***49 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5 December 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

***50 Britain in Bloom**

The Head of Streetscene presented a report on the cost to the Council of its involvement in the Britain in Bloom event in 2007, with an addendum circulated at the meeting covering sustainability and the impact on other Council functions. Members learned that the main work for the Streetscene service is in supporting and facilitating, with the financial element being relatively small in comparison with the Parks and Gardens budget. Working with the Britain in Bloom volunteers enabled the Council to help establish and maintain a high standard in the presentation of the towns that participated.

*50 **Britain in Bloom (continued)**

The Chairman welcomed representatives present from the Britain in Bloom Committees of Exmouth, Sidmouth and Seaton.

Mrs Pat Graham, Chairman of the Exmouth Britain in Bloom Committee, spoke on the many hours of work undertaken by the volunteers in enhancing the floral displays provided by the Council. The Committee also added to the displays and encouraged local businesses to participate in providing items such as hanging baskets, or making a financial contribution to the upkeep. Mrs Graham had received positive comments from both visitors to the area, and local residents on the resulting pleasing effect of the displays. Participation in Britain in Bloom in her opinion was boosting the tourism for the town, bringing more money into the local economy.

Mrs Joy Seward, Chairman of Sidmouth Britain in Bloom, and Mrs Caroline Carol, Secretary of Sidmouth Britain in Bloom, attended the meeting. Mrs Joy Seward echoed Mrs. Graham's views of the benefits to the local community, including the work with children in Sidmouth in helping design and put together some of the displays. Sidmouth Britain in Bloom Committee had also raised funds to assist, and had recently purchased water butts located at Sidmouth Swimming Pool to aid the watering of displays. Mrs Seward's view was that the small financial outlay by the Council gave a huge amount back to the community in terms of local pride and increased visitors.

Mr Bob Palacio, attending on behalf of Seaton Britain in Bloom, agreed with the two previous speakers on the value to the community; adding that in Seaton, the Britain in Bloom activities positively encouraged community involvement, including the local school, cycle club and allotment association.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment gave warm thanks to all those involved in Britain in Bloom, mentioning their hard work and long hours, given voluntarily. He also commented that the East Devon area generally had a high success rate in obtaining the prestigious awards under the scheme. This gave rise to pride in local residents about their surroundings, helping to maintain high standards. The Portfolio Holder for Environment was in support of continued financial assistance to the scheme.

Members discussed the issue of sustainability. Britain in Bloom criteria now included achieving sustainable displays, moving away from the more traditional carpet bedding schemes.

Members agreed that:

- the benefits to the District overall far outweighed the financial contribution made by the Council
- the hard work undertaken by the volunteers was admired and appreciated;
- continued support of the scheme would help preserve a sense of pride for all residents of East Devon for their district, with the scheme now also operating in villages.

The Chairman added his support, commenting on the number of awards obtained over the years and the value of the partnership working in bringing groups together in local communities.

RECOMMENDED that the financial support, and support from the Streetscene service, to volunteer committees of Britain in Bloom, be continued

The Chairman thanked the Britain in Bloom representatives for their attendance and comments at the meeting.

[Cllr J Knight declared an interest as a member of the committee of the Seaton Britain in Bloom]

***51 Planning appeals statistics**

Members considered the Head of Planning and Countryside's report on recent statistics relating to planning application decisions and subsequent appeals. She explained that an improving trend was evident in the second and third quarter of 2007/08. She hoped this trend continued, following the changes in procedure and scrutiny of the appeal decisions.

The main changes implemented involved more participation of the Appeals Officer, now considering applications at the draft agenda stage; and considering those applications described as "balanced", that is, not showing clear indication of approval or refusal. At present, between eighty and ninety percent of applications were determined through the delegated procedure.

Members questioned the Head of Planning and Countryside on some technical aspects of the application process, including how the wording of conditions or reasons for refusal were agreed upon.

The Chairman of Development Control explained to Members only a percentage of applications to the Development Control Committee to determine were then the subject of an appeal. He explained that the wording of reasons for refusal were clearly given and agreed at the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning and Regeneration expressed his confidence in the Development Control Committee, and the support given by Development Control and Legal officers. He also expressed the difficulties in consistency with defending decisions relating to personal preferences such as design.

The Chairman drew Member's attention to the appeal statistics for the authority in comparison with the national average, showing that in previous years the percentage of appeals allowed had been lower than the national average, and had only recently risen slightly above it.

RESOLVED that the report be noted

***52 Devon Primary Care Trust (PCT) debate**

Following the reporting of the "Financial Recovery Plan" to Executive Board on the newly amalgamated PCT, Scrutiny Members requested that a representative from the PCT attend a future meeting. Revised arrangements now meant that the Chairman of Scrutiny would attend the Executive Board meeting on the 26 March 2008 to bring questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director advised members that Dr Kevin Snee would be presenting a paper to the Executive Board on the way forward for the PCT.

Members discussed their concerns over the moving of treatment for upper gastro-intestinal cancer to Plymouth, rather than having facilities for treatment at Exeter as well.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities expressed her concern on the centralisation of services, which affected patients' ability to travel to the treatment centre.

***52 Devon Primary Care Trust debate (continued)**

Members put forward suggested questions as follows:

- What measures will the PCT put in place for providing transport where the patient is travelling across a county border?;
- Based on the permitted population catchment per centre at 500,000, would the population of the South West peninsula permit two centres; that is, Plymouth and Exeter, especially in mind of the recent move to have treatment for upper gastro-intestinal cancer at Plymouth?
- Can equipment from the Devon PCT be facilitated for use in other counties (for example, where East Devon resident has registered doctor in Somerset) ?;
- What is the procedure for a Member to register a complaint on behalf of a constituent to help resolve their outstanding issues?

The Chairman asked Members of the Scrutiny Committee to forward any further questions to their Democratic Services Officer. Members requested that Dr Snee be provided with the questions, when prioritised, prior to the Executive Board meeting on the 26 March 2008.

RESOLVED

1. that any further questions submitted by Scrutiny Members would be considered by the chairman;
2. that the questions set out in the minutes would be prioritised;
3. that the questions would be provided to the PCT representative once clarified, prior to the Executive Board on the 26 March 2008.

53 ICT Investment Task and Finish Forum

The Head of ICT presented a report on the recommendations drawn up by the ICT TaFF, and the draft ICT Strategy for 2007 – 2011. The Forum had reviewed the investment in the service over the past four years and had found it to be value for money. The Forum had also been keen to see that future investment enabled the service to take the Council forward.

The Chairman of the ICT Forum explained to Members that the TaFF was keen to push for future investment and development in order to drive service improvements. He highlighted examples such as enabling Housing Benefit officers to deal with claims on home visits or at town council offices.

Members considered the draft ICT strategy, concentrating on the following points:

- Historically services held their own software systems; plans were in place to replace such systems and simplify them in order to reach the corporate requirements;
- Equipment no longer required had previously been offered to Parish Councils but the offer not taken up. When the next batch of reasonable equipment becomes available it will be offered to town and parish councils.;
- The Information Security Policy needs to be updated frequently in order to cover developing methods of data theft and hacking issues. Whilst this would not necessarily improve the service given, it provides a level of confidence to our customers;
- The strategy shows a direction of travel for the authority; any new project requires consideration by the Project Board. The Board considers cost implications along with the merits of the project.

ICT Investment Task and Finish Forum (continued)

Members considered the recommendations made by the Forum, with focus on the following areas:

- Examination of the merits of more mobile working would be required; Members considered if a pilot scheme of the new technology proposed would be beneficial;
- Practical means of contact with officers working from home through Voice over Internet Protocol which enables calls on the work extension number to be picked up at home;
- Prioritising the availability of making payments on the Council's website and touchtone payments;
- European Computer Driving Licence as minimum competency for all employees and Members; being subsidised through the Learning Council and being run in conjunction with Devon County Council;
- Addition of a recommendation to offer redundant equipment to Town and Parish Councils for free to encourage those Councils to improve their service;
- Addition of a recommendation to offer a town or parish based e-mail address. This was to provide logical e-mail address rather than personal e-mail address of town or parish clerk.

The Chairman expressed his thanks to both the Members of the Forum and the officers involved.

- RECOMMENDED**
1. that the ICT Strategy 2007-2010 be adopted by the Council;
 2. that the Council continues to provide more accessible services through the use of new and innovative ICT solutions;
 3. that in principle, the idea of shared services provision throughout Devon be supported only after the completion of the Boundary Commission's review of Local Government in Devon and only if a clear business case for sharing was made;
 4. that the establishment of smaller sub offices and a smaller central Council HQ building be examined;
 5. that the provision of home working for Officers continues to be encouraged and expanded;
 6. that the Council aims to achieve a fully transactional website offering all possible services online as soon as possible;
 7. that the Council invests in a modern ICT system to provide a range of customer access channels and innovative solutions to meet the diverse needs of all customers;
 8. that the Council should investigate and develop more flexible ways for Officers and Members to work 'off-site' including the use of satellite offices, use of other authority premises and Personal Computers (PC) and Personal Digital Assistants (PDA);
 9. that the shared use and access to services from multi agency buildings should be encouraged, particularly with DCC;

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ICT Investment Task and Finish Forum (continued)

- RECOMMENDED**
10. that all District Council Members be tasked with achieving closer and improved electronic links between the District Council and Parish Councils within their ward;
 11. that, whilst not being at the very forefront, the Council should aim to be amongst the top councils in exploiting new technology for the benefit of customers and improvements to services;
 12. that all Officers and Councillors should be encouraged to attend IT training;
 13. that the minimum level of competency for all employees and Councillors should be the European Computer Driving Licence Level 2, and the Council should take whatever action is necessary to achieve this;
 14. that redundant equipment be offered to Town and Parish Councils at no charge;
 15. that town and parish councils be offered a town or parish based e-mail address.

54

Achievement of a second passing loop on the Exeter – Salisbury line

Members considered the Chairman’s paper on the Exeter to Salisbury to Waterloo railway line in specific relation to the recently published South West Regional Spatial Strategy (SWRSS).

- RECOMMENDED** that the Executive Board give its strong support to the early introduction of the second passing loop on the Exeter to Salisbury line.

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Quarterly Monitoring of Performance – Third Quarter 2007/08

Members considered the performance information for the period of 1 October to 31 December 2007.

The indicators discussed by Members were:

- L64 Proportion of Councillors trained in regulatory functions. More training sessions were being organised for the next six months for those Members who had been unable to attend a previous session.
- Planning and Benefit related indicators. Denise Lyon, Corporate Director, advised that these two service areas had been prioritised for the systems thinking reviews directly as a result of these indicator results.

A fuller explanation of the definitions of the performance indicators will be considered for future reports.

- RESOLVED** that the report be noted

56 **Dangerous dogs**

This item was included for Member's information regarding the law on dangerous dogs; Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director, had also received a letter from Hugo Swire MP covering parliamentary questions on the subject.

RESOLVED that the letters be noted.

*57 **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Members considered the Forward Plan for the Scrutiny Committee.

The tour of Leisure East Devon was now planned for the 4 March 2008, taking in a presentation and tour of the Tennis Centre and Exmouth Sports Centre. All Members of Scrutiny were asked to attend, with an invitation to all other Members. The Chief Executive of Leisure East Devon would then be present at the Scrutiny Committee on 5 March 2008.

Members were invited to propose new items to be added to meetings later in the year.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted

58 **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 Planning TaFF, along with Portfolio Holders, were invited to attend a presentation by the Check Team on the Planning Review on the 5 March 2008 at 4.30pm.

RECOMMENDED that the Members of the Planning TaFF be involved in the systems thinking review of the Planning service.

Chairman Date.....