

WEST DEVON OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY (EXTERNAL) COMMITTEE



Minutes of a meeting of the **West Devon Overview and Scrutiny (External) Committee** held on **Tuesday, 21st March, 2017** at **10.00 am** at the **Chamber - Kilworthy Park**

Present: **Councillors:**

Chairman Cllr Sellis
Vice Chairman

Cllr Sheldon
Cllr Watts

In attendance:

Councillors:
Cllr Moyse
Cllr Samuel

Cllr Yelland

Officers:
Head of Paid Service
CoP Lead – Housing, Revenue & Benefits
Commissioning Manager
Specialist – Assets & Place Making
Chief Executive – Devon & Cornwall Housing

42. **Apologies for Absence**
***O&S(E) 42**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs K Ball; D W Cloke, T G Pearce and B Stephens
43. **Confirmation of Minutes**
***O&S(E) 43**
The minutes of the Meeting held on 11 October 2016 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.
44. **Declarations of Interest**
***O&S(E) 44**

Members and officers were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of this meeting, but there were none made.

45. **Public Forum**

***O&S(E) 45**

There were no issues raised during the Public Forum session at this meeting.

46. **Hub Committee Forward Plan**

***O&S(E) 46**

The most recent (published March 2017) Hub Committee Forward Plan was presented for consideration. With no specific issues being raised, the Committee subsequently noted the contents of the Plan.

47. **Devon and Cornwall Housing**

***O&S(E) 47**

The Chairman introduced Mr Paul Crawford (Devon and Cornwall Housing (DCH) Chief Executive) to the meeting and invited him to undertake a brief presentation that covered the following headline areas:-

- An External Environmental Update and how DCH was responding;
- Issues to consider in delivering affordable housing in West Devon; and
- Any Subsequent Member Question(s).

In the ensuing discussion, reference was made to:-

- (a) the proposal to relocate back office members of DCH staff. The Committee was advised that the intention of DCH was to take the service to their customers as opposed to them having to visit their offices. Members welcomed the proposal for some DCH staff to be relocated to Kilworthy Park and felt that this would create the opportunity for greater synergy and partnership working between the Council's officers and their DCH counterparts;
- (b) accommodation for elderly residents. A Member highlighted that his local Neighbourhood Plan had identified a shortage of housing provision for the elderly population and questioned what encouragement there was for developers to build suitable accommodation for elderly residents. In reply, the DCH Chief Executive highlighted the challenges and sensitivities relating to this matter, but stated that downsizing had to be encouraged to reverse this trend. In taking the point a step further, there was also an identified need to ensure that the right quality of housing was available to enable residents to downsize and the Council (as the Local Planning Authority) was therefore encouraged to hold active dialogue with developers in an attempt to address this matter;
- (c) the approach to empty properties. The Chief Executive informed that, on average, DCH had 1,500 empty vacancies in any one year. In addition, it was noted that the average turnaround time for empty properties to be re-filled was just over 20 days and approximately £2,200 was spent by DCH on each vacancy. For financial reasons, the

organisation of empty properties and it annually budgeted 0.5% of its total budget into a 'rent loss budget' (which equated to just over £500,000) in order to reflect the impact;

- (d) any damage and repair to DCH properties. The Committee was advised that DCH did pursue tenants for any losses incurred through damage and property repairs. However, it was acknowledged that collection rates were fairly poor and it was a judgement call in each instance to assess whether it was economical to pursue these tenants. Nonetheless, the organisation had an annual contingency write-off budget of £450,000 for such purposes. When questioned, the Chief Executive also confirmed that any such tenants would not be re-housed by DCH;
- (e) was committed to a quick turnaround
- (f) contact with DCH. Some Members shared their poor recent experiences of trying to make telephone contact with DCH. In reply, the Chief Executive was disappointed at these experiences and highlighted that the organisation had invested heavily in its Customer Contact Centre. It was therefore agreed that the matter would be taken up outside of this Committee meeting by the Members and the Chief Executive;
- (g) use of contractors. Having experienced some issues with contractors, it was confirmed that DCH's repairs service was now undertaken almost entirely by in-house employees;
- (h) the calculation of rental figures. Some Members sought clarity in respect of how DCH calculated its rental figures and cited a particular example whereby North Tawton residents were paying rental figures based upon the formula applied to Exeter residents. In reply, the Chief Executive informed that figures should be based upon the locality (and not Exeter as in this cited example) and he requested a conversation with relevant Members to look into this issue further. As an assurance, the Chief Executive also stated that it was not in the best interests of DCH to set rents too high as this led to properties either remaining vacant or incurring a high turnover of tenants;
- (i) the impact of planning policies. In urging the need for pragmatism, the Chief Executive stated that there was a direct correlation between how restrictive adopted planning policies were and the pace of housing delivery. In respect of viability, it was felt that 30% affordable housing per development was a realistic and attainable target to ensure delivery;
- (j) Devon Home Choice. To ensure that residents were in pole position to obtain a property in their preferred area(s) of choice, the Chief Executive encouraged Members to promote amongst their constituents the benefits of registering with Devon Home Choice.

In concluding the agenda item, the Chairman thanked Mr Crawford for his attendance, presentation and very informative responses to Member questions.

48. **Our Plan - Annual Report**

O&S(E) 48

The Committee considered the Annual Report of the Council for 2016/17 and noted that its purpose was two-fold:-

1. To review the Council's progress over the last financial year; and
2. To set the scene for the upcoming year ahead.

In the ensuing debate, reference was made to:-

- (a) the visual presentation of the Report. As an externally facing document, a number of Members put on record their support for the format and visual presentation of the document;
- (b) the term 'Our Plan'. Some Members were of the view that the term 'Our Plan' was causing a great deal of confusion amongst the local community. In accepting the point, the Head of Paid Service replied that it was his intention for 'Our Plan' and the current number of strategic objectives to be revisited by Members later in the year;
- (c) the tone of the Finance Section. The view was expressed that the tone of the Finance Section was not necessarily reflective of the serious future funding pressures that were being faced by the Council;
- (d) distribution of the Report. Once the Report had been ultimately adopted by the Council at its meeting on 11 April 2017, it was intended that only a few copies would be printed with the promotion of the document being via the Council website. As a general point, a Member felt that, based upon the low attendance at the ongoing Joint Local Plan consultation events, the Council should revisit its approach to public engagement;

It was then:

RESOLVED

That the Committee **RECOMMEND** that the Hub Committee **RECOMMEND** to Council that:

1. the progress and achievements made by the Council be noted; and
2. the West Devon Annual Report (as outlined at Appendix A of the presented agenda report) for the 2016/17 Financial Year be adopted and published.

49. **Dartmoor Communities Fund 2016/17 - Feedback**

*** O&S(E) 49**

A report was considered by the Committee that described the details of the projects being funded by Dartmoor National Park Authority from the New Homes Bonus funds allocated to them by the Council. In discussion, the following points were raised:-

- (a) Officers highlighted a discrepancy between the sums quoted in the presented agenda report (£22,129 and £24,136) and gave a commitment to provide clarity on these figures outside of the Committee meeting;
- (b) Having highlighted the number of alternative community funding streams that were currently administered by the Council, the Committee was of the view that a piece of work should be undertaken by officers with the objective of streamlining these sources of grant funding.

It was then:

RESOLVED

That the projects being funded by Dartmoor National Park Authority from the New Homes Bonus funds allocated by the Council be noted.

50. **Tamar Trails Legacy**

*** O&S(E) 50**

The Committee considered a report that sought to familiarise Members with the background of the Tamar Trails and to provide an update on the current and future commitments and opportunities with respect to the 'Tamar Trails Legacy'.

In discussion, the Committee felt that the officer recommendation for an annual update did not sufficiently reflect its concerns over the financial implications arising from the Legacy. As a result, the following alternative recommendation was **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and on being put to the vote was declared **CARRIED**:-

'That an options appraisal be produced for the Tamar Trails Legacy with the primary aim of reducing the budget deficit for the consideration of the Hub Committee at a future meeting.'

In light of this decision, Members were also invited to submit their thoughts and suggestions on the Legacy to the lead officer before the options appraisal was produced.

It was then:

RESOLVED

1. That the report be noted; and

2. That an options appraisal be produced for the Tamar Trails Legacy with the primary aim of reducing the budget deficit for the consideration of the Hub Committee at a future meeting.

51. **Committee Decisions Log**

***O&S(E) 51**

The latest version of the Committee decisions log was presented to the meeting.

With no debate or questions being raised on the log, it was then:

RESOLVED

That the published Decisions Log be noted.

52. **Annual Work Programme 2017/18: Initial Thoughts**

***O&S(E) 52**

The Committee gave initial consideration to its draft 2017/18 Work Programme and made reference to:-

- the wish for the Devon and Cornwall Housing Chief Executive to be invited to provide an annual update to a Committee meeting during early 2018;
- Cllr Sheldon being invited to provide an update at a Committee meeting early during the 2017/18 Municipal Year on rural broadband provision in the Borough;
- the Council's future approach to arts. Further to the decision to establish a Task and Finish Group to review the Council's future approach to arts, officers agreed to provide the relevant minute extract to Cllrs Cheadle and Roberts so that they could progress this review.

53. **Member Learning and Development Opportunities Arising from this Meeting**

***O&S(E) 53**

Committee Members felt that, assuming that the revised governance arrangements (that included the creation of only one Overview and Scrutiny Committee) were approved by the Council, there may be a need for some specific Overview and Scrutiny related training to be included in the Council's Member Learning and Development Plan.

The Meeting concluded at 12.40 pm

Signed by:

Chairman

