

WEST DEVON OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY (INTERNAL) COMMITTEE



Minutes of a meeting of the **West Devon Overview and Scrutiny (Internal) Committee** held on **Tuesday, 6th October, 2015** at **2.00 pm** at the **Chamber - Kilworthy Park**

Present: **Councillors:**

Chairman Cllr Musgrave
Vice Chairman Cllr Yelland

Cllr Edmonds
Cllr Evans
Cllr Hockridge
Cllr Kimber

Cllr McInnes
Cllr Mott
Cllr Moyse
Cllr Sellis

In attendance:

Councillors:
Cllr Benson
Cllr Cann OBE
Cllr Cloke
Cllr Leech

Cllr Moody
Cllr Parker
Cllr Pearce
Cllr Sanders

Officers:
Head of Paid Service
Executive Director (Service Delivery & Commercial Development)
Group Manager – Support Services
S151 Officer
Specialist Manager
CoP Lead – Development Management
Monitoring Officer
Contact Centre manager

21. **Apologies for Absence**

***O&S(I) 21**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr M Davies and Cllr K Ball, who had been invited to attend in his capacity as Chairman of the Member Development Steering Group.

22. **Confirmation of Minutes**
***O&S(I) 22**
The minutes of the Meeting held on 21 July 2015 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.
23. **Declarations of Interest**
***O&S(I) 23**
Members and officers were asked to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of this meeting. These were recorded as follows:-

Cllrs J Yelland, C Edmonds, C Mott, J Evans and L J G Hockridge each declared a personal interest in Item 7: 'Medium Term Financial Strategy for the Five Year Period 2016/17 to 2020/21' (Minute O&S(I) 26 below refers) and specifically the part of the item that related to the amount of Council Tax Support Grant proposed to be passed on to Town and Parish Councils for 2016/17.
Each Member declared their interest by virtue of being serving Members of local Town and Parish Councils and each remained in the meeting and took part in the debate and vote thereon.
24. **Public Forum**
***O&S(I) 24**
It was noted that no issues were raised in accordance with the Public Forum.
25. **Hub Committee Forward Plan**
***O&S(I) 25**
The most recent (published 29 September 2015) Hub Committee Forward Plan was presented for consideration. Since no issues were raised by Members, the Committee proceeded to note the contents of the Plan without any further comment.
26. **Medium Term Financial Strategy for the Five Year Period 2016/17 to 2020/21**
O&S(I) 26
The Committee considered a report that presented the annual review of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The MTFS was based on a financial forecast over a rolling five-year timeframe to 2020/21, which would help to ensure that resources were aligned to the outcomes in Our Plan.

In the ensuing debate, particular reference was made to:-

(a) the Government announcement in relation to Councils being able to keep all of the Business Rates generated in their local areas. Officers informed that the implications of the announcement made earlier that week were as yet unknown and it was anticipated that further information would be forthcoming at the Autumn Spending Review on 25 November 2015;

- (b) the complexities of understanding local government finance. In the event of any Members not fully understanding any of the issues relating to local government finance, the Chairman invited them to request a meeting with the Section 151 Officer;
- (c) Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). Members noted that, whilst the Council had a statutory responsibility to fund and administer DFGs, it did not have any control over factors such as the number of referrals. As a consequence, the Government only partially grant funded DFGs and the Council therefore had to fund the shortfall. In an attempt to recognise the benefits that DFGs had on other public sector bodies (e.g. the health sector), officers informed that discussions were ongoing with local MPs in an attempt to establish a more joined up and co-ordinated approach towards the funding of DFGs;
- (d) Income Generation streams related to renewable energy. In reply to Members' questioning whether it was now a realistic aspiration to raise income through renewable energy methods, it was noted that the MTFS did not make any provision or specific reference to this being a potential income source. However, at this stage, all income streams were being fully explored by the Business Development Group Manager;
- (e) the upcoming Budget Principles Workshop for Members on 20 October 2015. Members were encouraged to attend this interactive Workshop, which would partly focus on the MTFS;
- (f) the proposed level of Council Tax for 2016/17. Whilst regrettable, such was the extent of the continual budget reductions in central government grant funding, that Members felt it essential to continue to increase the Council's base budget through modest increases in Council Tax. The following motion was then **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and on being put to the vote was declared **CARRIED**:

'That the level of Council Tax increase for 2016/17 be set at 1.99%';

- (g) New Homes Bonus monies being used to support the revenue budget. Some Members expressed their concerns at the level of reliance which the Council had placed on the New Homes Bonus monies underpinning the Revenue Budget. However, the Members also acknowledged that the Council had little choice at present, but there was a general acceptance of a need to plan ahead for life after the New Homes Bonus;
- (h) the amount of Council Tax Support Grant to be passed on to Town and Parish Councils for 2016/17. In light of the anticipated 11.2% decrease in Settlement Funding Assessment from central government, the majority felt it to be appropriate that the Council pass this on to town and parish councils. Whilst unfortunate, Members recognised that if this reduction was not passed on to town and parish councils, then the Council would have to absorb it.

In addition, since town and parish councils were not subject to capping, then they maintained the ability to increase their precepts without any restrictions. Should the Council ultimately endorse this proposal, Members emphasised the importance of this decision being appropriately communicated with town and parish councils;

- (i) establishing the minimum level of unearmarked reserves at £750,000. In endorsing this principle, Members recognised that previous audit guidance recommended that it was prudent for unearmarked reserves to be set at least 10% of the Council's net budget;
- (j) the anticipated 2016/17 budget surplus of £571,177. The Committee was of the view that the anticipated surplus for 2016/17 should be ringfenced for future income generation opportunities and held in an earmarked reserve for that specific purpose.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Committee has considered the five-year Medium Term Financial Strategy and has provided an indication to the Hub Committee of the budget principles that the Committee would like to see adopted, with particular reference to:-

1. the level of Council Tax increase for 2016/17 being set at 1.99%;
2. New Homes Bonus monies being used to support the revenue budget;
3. the amount of Council Tax Support Grant to be passed on to Town and Parish Councils for 2016/17 be reduced by 11.2% (in line with the reduction incurred by the Council in its Settlement Funding Assessment);
4. maintaining the current Council policy on the minimum level of unearmarked reserves being set at £750,000 (paragraph 9.2 of the presented agenda report refers); and
5. the anticipated 2016/17 budget surplus (£571,177) being ringfenced for future income generation opportunities and held in an earmarked reserve for that purpose.

27.

Update on Transformation Programme T18 *O&S(I) 27

The Group Manager (Support Services) presented an update on the Transformation Programme. In so doing, the latest version of the Phase 1b Software roll-out (as attached at Appendix A) was tabled to the meeting.

In the ensuing discussion, specific reference was made to:-

- the planning portal. Whilst the problems with the old portal were well rehearsed, the Committee was informed that it would take four weeks to fully repair it. As a consequence, and in

- light of the close proximity to the launch of the new portal, it was not considered to be an effective use of time to permanently fix the old portal;
- prioritising the processes. It was noted that officers were currently working on prioritising those processes that were considered to have the greatest impact on customer services;
 - the programme still being within the financial parameters that had been agreed by the Council.

28. **Development Management - Service Update and Presentation**

***O&S(I) 28**

The Specialist Manager conducted a PowerPoint presentation which provided an update on the Development Management service.

In discussion, the following points were raised:-

- (a) When questioned, officers advised that the backlog of planning applications currently stood at 90, with each of these being defined as 'non-majors'. In reply, Members stressed the impact that this was having on local businesses and residents alike and queried how they should be responding to upset applicants. In such instances, officers urged Members to encourage applicants to either contact the Specialist Manager or the Community Of Practice Lead – Development Management. At the very least, the Council wanted to discourage any more appeals or complaints from being lodged;
- (b) With regard to planning enforcement cases, the Committee was informed that there were around 209 live enforcement investigations currently in the system. Enforcement Officers were currently working through the list with local Members and town and parish council clerks and a monthly progress report was being sent out to Members and clerks;
- (c) A lengthy debate took place with regard to the most appropriate methods of keeping Members informed of service updates. A number of options were considered, with the following conclusions reached:-
 - o a monthly update via the Members' Bulletin. Members concluded that a monthly service update could be included in the Bulletin;
 - o an update presented to the next Overview and Scrutiny (Internal) Committee meeting on 8 March 2016. The Committee endorsed this suggestion;
 - o consideration at future Hub Committee meetings. Such was the significance of the issue, that some Members felt that a service update should be a standing agenda item for the Hub Committee. However, the majority view was that it should be at the discretion of the lead Hub Committee Member to determine as and when it was appropriate to schedule a service update on to a Hub Committee meeting agenda

29. **Customer Services Stats Update**

***O&S(I) 29**

Having presented the Panel with the latest Customer Services performance comparisons, the Contact Centre Manager advised that the capacity issues were recognised. To address this issue, the service was in the process of recruiting 8 full-time equivalent (fte) members of staff. Of these 8, it was confirmed that 2.5 fte were to be based at West Devon, with the remaining 5.5 based at South Hams.

In the general discussion, particular reference was made to:-

- (a) the West Devon area, A Member requested that members of staff who were based at South Hams be given additional training on the villages, parishes and geography of the West Devon area;
- (b) the role of the Locality Officers. Officers advised that the locality model of working had yet to have a big impact for customer services;
- (c) the volume of calls being taken on behalf of other agencies and authorities. Whilst the Council did not currently have a breakdown of calls in this regard, officers advised that a new telephony system was being evaluated. One of the positive factors of this new system was that it included provision for an increased number of automated messages to be recorded and this would enable greater signposting opportunities;
- (d) footfall into the Council offices. To ascertain any trends in footfall, Members noted that the service was now starting to log footfall.

30.

Ombudsman Update and Annual Review Letter

***O&S(I) 30**

The Committee considered a report that presented the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Review Letter 2015 regarding Ombudsman complaints received against the Council for the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015.

In discussion, the following points were raised:-

- (a) Officers highlighted that the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) was giving great emphasis to the importance of dealing with (and reducing) the number of complaints received by the Council. SLT was in the process of rolling out a cultural shift across the organisation whereby a complaint should be considered as a project that needed to be solved. Furthermore, since the overwhelming majority of complaints received were associated with poor communication, SLT was having more pro-active dialogue with the Ombudsman and actively promoting officers to say sorry (where appropriate) to complainants. The majority of staff would also be attending a mandatory Ombudsman course during October 2015;
- (b) Some Members made reference to a particularly high profile case and felt that the lack of communication with both local Ward Members and the Planning and Licensing Committee in this instance had been regrettable. Furthermore, these Members highlighted the reputational damage that had been caused by this longstanding case and felt that it

would be helpful for the Monitoring Officer to produce and provide Members with a 'lessons learned' paper in this regard.

It was then:

RESOLVED

That the Committee has reviewed the Ombudsman's Annual Letter and has considered what corporate lessons may be learnt and whether further service improvements are required.

It was then:

RESOLVED

That the Committee has reviewed the Ombudsman's Annual Letter and has considered what corporate lessons may be learnt and whether further service improvements are required.

31. **Notes Arising from the Member Development Steering Group Meeting held on 24 August 2015**

***O&S(I) 31**

Members were presented with the notes arising from the Member Development Steering Group meeting held on 24 August 2015. In presenting the notes, the Committee Vice-Chairman stressed the benefits of Members completing the Learning Needs Questionnaire and taking advantage of the One-to-One interview opportunity with the Devon Member Development Officer.

It was then:

RESOLVED

That the notes arising from the recent Member Development Steering Group meeting be received and noted.

32. **Task and Finish Group Updates:**

***O&S(I) 32**

(a) Performance Management

The Panel was informed that a draft report had been prepared and the Task and Finish Group had made a number of comments that were currently being reviewed.

33. **Draft Work Programme 2015/16**

***O&S(I) 33**

The Committee considered its draft 2015/16 Work Programme (as circulated with the published agenda) and made reference to a further Development Management service update being presented to the next Committee meeting on 8 March 2016.

The Meeting concluded at 4.35 pm

Signed by:

Chairman
