

# WEST DEVON HUB COMMITTEE



West Devon  
Borough  
Council

## Minutes of a meeting of the **West Devon Hub Committee** held on **Tuesday, 19th September, 2023 at 2.00 pm** at the **Chamber** **- Kilworthy Park**

Present: **Councillors:**

**Chairman** Cllr Ewings  
**Vice Chairman** Cllr Renders

Cllr Bridgewater  
Cllr Edmonds  
Cllr Leech

Cllr Daniel  
Cllr Jory  
Cllr Mott

**In attendance:**  
Councillors:

Cllr Calder (via Teams)  
Cllr Oxborough  
Cllr Viney

Cllr Dexter  
Cllr Squire  
Cllr West

Officers:  
Senior Leadership Team  
Head of Democratic Services  
Principal Climate Change Officer  
Head of Revenues & Benefits  
Assistant Director – Planning  
Head of Housing  
Head of Finance

### 10. **Declarations of Interest**

\*HC 10/23

Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be discussed but there were none made.

### 11. **Confirmation of Minutes**

\*HC 11/23

The Minutes of the Hub Committee meeting held on 11 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

12. **Public Questions**

\*HC 12/23

It was noted that no Public Questions had been received in accordance with the Hub Committee Procedure Rules

13. **Hub Committee Forward Plan**

\*HC 13/23

Members were presented with the latest version of the Hub Committee Forward Plan that set out items on the agenda for Hub Committee meetings for the next four months and proceeded to note its content.

14. **A Renewed Commitment to Climate Change & Biodiversity**

\*HC 14/23

The Hub Committee considered a report that provided an update on the work undertaken since the Council had declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019 (Minute CM 29 refers).

During the ensuing debate, particular reference was made to:

- (a) recommendation 2. To reflect the point that the 'Mayor's Young Person Environment Award' would only be in place for the term of office of the Mayor, an alternative form of wording for recommendation 2 was **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and, when put to the vote, was declared **CARRIED**:

*'2. That the establishment of the 'Mayor's Young Person Environment Award' for the 2023/24 Municipal Year be noted.'*

- (b) the evolving nature of the Devon Carbon Plan. In discussion, some Members questioned the extent of the changes that had been made to the Plan since it had been last considered by Full Council at its meeting held on 22 November 2022 (Minute CM 53/22 refers). Without the detailed knowledge of the changes, coupled with the absence of a Member Briefing to discuss the updates to the Plan and the contents of the Climate & Ecological (CE) Bill prior to them being formally presented, led to an amendment being **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** (to recommendation parts 3 and 4 respectively) that read as follows:

*'3. That Council be **RECOMMENDED** to continue to fully support the aims and intentions of the Devon Carbon Plan and to review the Council's Carbon Reduction Strategy through 'A Plan for West Devon' (as appropriate); and*

*4. That Council be **RECOMMENDED** to support regional and national policy to reduce emissions and tackle climate change by lobbying our MPs on specific issues and*

*embedding appropriate costed actions into 'A Plan for West Devon'.*

In support of the amendment, some Members felt that this would ensure that the Council was not committing to endorsing the Devon Carbon Plan at this time without being fully aware of both whether it contained any resource implications to the Borough Council and what the changes had been to its contents since last being considered by the Council in November 2022.

These Members also wished for it to be noted that they were fully supportive of the Council's declared Climate Change & Biodiversity Emergency and they could also be minded to endorse the Devon Carbon Plan but they did not feel they had sufficient information on its contents at this time and its implications to the residents and communities of West Devon.

In contrast, other Members stated that they did not support the amendment and, by simply endorsing the Plan and supporting the contents of the CE Bill, would help to underline the Council's commitment to its declared Climate Change and Biodiversity Emergency. Furthermore, the wording of the recommendations were not considered by these Members to result in any additional resource implications to the Council.

Given the nature of the debate on the amendment, the Leader suggested that an alternative amendment may be an appropriate way forward. This alternative read as follows:

- '3. *That the Committee reconsider the matters of the Devon Carbon Plan and the CE Bill at the next Hub Committee Meeting (to be held on 21 November 2023), with an informal Member Briefing on these subject areas being held before this date.'*

Having been presented with this alternative, the proposer and seconder of the original amendment withdrew their proposal. The alternative amendment wording (as set out above) was then **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and, when put to the vote, was declared **CARRIED** and therefore become part of the substantive motion.

It was then:

### **RESOLVED**

1. That the update regarding the Council's progress on climate change and biodiversity and the emerging priorities set out by the new administration be noted; and
2. That the establishment of the 'Mayor's Young Person Environment Award' for the 2023/24 Municipal Year be noted; and

3. That the Committee reconsider the matters of the Devon Carbon Plan and the CE Bill at the next Hub Committee Meeting (to be held on 21 November 2023), with an informal Member Briefing on these subject areas being held before this date.

15. **Supporting Our Care Leavers: Council Tax**

HC 15/23

A report was considered that sought to recommend to Council approval for the adoption of a Council Tax Discount Scheme relating to Care Leavers.

In the ensuing debate, Members welcomed the leading role that had been taken on by the Council in the development of this Scheme and expressed their full support that it be presented to Council for approval.

It was then:

**RESOLVED**

That Council be **RECOMMENDED** to adopt a Council Tax Discount Scheme for Care Leavers with effect from 1 October 2023.

16. **Planning Improvement Plan Update**

\*HC 16/23

Members considered a report that provided an update on the progress made against key elements of the Planning Improvement Plan.

During discussion, reference was made to:

- (a) paragraph 5.9 of the published agenda report. Officers apologised for the incorrect table being included at paragraph 5.9 of the published agenda report. The correct version was subsequently tabled to the meeting and, for completeness, is set out at Appendix A to these minutes;
- (b) planning income. Whilst the Council had received more planning applications this year, it had received less planning income due to the reduction in major planning applications being submitted.

With regard to planning fees, it was noted that all local authorities had been lobbying Central Government to request that they were increased in order to be reflective of the actual cost of determining a planning application. As a result of this lobbying, officers had recently been informed that planning fees would be able to be increased;

- (c) recruitment and retention challenges for the planning team. When questioned, officers informed that, whilst some progress

had been made in recruiting (and retaining) staff, the challenges (which were reflected nationwide) did still remain.

It was then:

### **RESOLVED**

1. That progress made on delivery of the Planning Improvement Plan and update on performance be noted;
2. That the return to notification of applications in accordance with the adopted Statement of Community Involvement with effect from 1 October 2023 be noted; and
3. That the proposal to undertake a full review of the existing policy and approach to handling enforcement complaints be noted.

### 17. **Progress Update on Housing Projects**

\*HC 17/23

Members were presented with a report that provided an update on the various Housing projects taking place across the Borough and that also sought approval of funding for the purchase of additional properties and the modernisation of others already in the Council's ownership.

During debate, particular reference was made to:

- (i) the Central Government Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF). Officers were congratulated for their swift responses in successfully applying to access LAHF monies. Having been informed that not all local authorities had applied to the LAHF, Members were hopeful that there would be additional opportunities for the Council to make further applications to access the unspent monies;
- (ii) the details contained in exempt Appendix B on the Spring Hill redevelopment project. Having completed the due diligence works, Members acknowledged the recommendation to put the project on hold, but they hoped that alternative project proposals would come forward as soon as was practically possible.

It was then:

### **RESOLVED**

1. That the acquisition of five homes through the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF 1) be noted;
2. That participation in LAHF 2 and the purchase of at least an additional two properties be agreed;

3. That approval be given to expenditure of up to £410,000 from Section 106 affordable housing contributions to purchase properties through LAHF 2;
4. That expenditure of up to £80,000 from the Affordable Housing Revenue Earmarked Reserve be approved for the modernisation of 3 Springhill to a suitable standard so as to enable it to be used as additional temporary accommodation; and
5. That the details contained in the exempt Appendix B to the presented agenda report be noted and that further progression of the Spring Hill redevelopment project be put on hold whilst other options were explored.

18. **Proposed Changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2024/25**

\*HC 18/23

Members were presented with a report that set out the annual requirement for Councils to revisit their existing council tax support scheme and decide whether to replace or revisit their scheme, the requirements for changing the scheme and the associated time constraints.

In discussion, there was unanimous support expressed for the contents of the report and it was then:

**RESOLVED**

1. That the proposed public consultation on a Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024/25 (as detailed in section 3 of the presented agenda report) be approved; and
2. That the results of the public consultation be presented to a future Hub Committee meeting prior to a Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024/25 being considered for approval by the Council.

19. **2022/2023 Draft Revenue and Capital Outturn**

\*HC 19/23

Members were presented with a report that set out the draft Revenue and Capital Outturn position for 2022/23 and that also provided a schedule of the Reserve balances at 31 March 2023.

During debate, a number of concerns were expressed over the extensive delays from Grant Thornton in carrying out its external audit work into the Council's accounts. When considering the trend for significant annual increases to be imposed in Audit Fees that the Council was required to pay, a Member **PROPOSED** the following additional recommendation:

*'That officers write to Grant Thornton to express the disappointment of the Committee that the organisation was unable to complete its External Audit work for the Borough Council in a timely manner.'*

The Section 151 Officer was invited to comment and, whilst recognising the sentiments of the proposal, informed the Committee that there was a national recruitment and retention issue that was plaguing the audit industry. The Officer proceeded to advise that she had made representations to senior colleagues at Grant Thornton to point out the Council had a shared finance team working across two councils and, therefore, the proposal to start the external audit work in the middle of the budget setting process (January 2024) was wholly unacceptable. In recognition of the issues raised, Grant Thornton representatives had since committed to bringing forward the external audit to November 2023.

Whilst the Member retained a number of concerns over the current situation, in view of the comments that had been expressed by the Section 151 Officer, she proceeded to formally withdraw her proposal.

It was then:

#### **RESOLVED**

That the draft Revenue and Capital outturn figures for the 2022/23 financial year be noted including the overall Revenue outturn position of an underspend of £79,000 for 2022/23 (1.0% of the total Budget of £7.770 million).

#### 20. **Capital Programme Monitoring as at 31 July 2023**

\*HC 20/23

A report was considered that advised Members of the Capital Programme financial position as at 31 July 2023.

With no issues raised during the debate, it was then:

#### **RESOLVED**

That the contents of the presented agenda report be endorsed

#### 21. **Month 4 Revenue Budget Monitoring 2023/2024**

\*HC 21/23

Members considered a report that provided a forecast for the year end budget position and that also enabled them to monitor income and expenditure variations against the approved budget for 2023/24.

During discussion, a question was raised regarding the projected deficit for employment estates income. In response, officers informed that an additional income target (amounting to £50,000) had been built into the 2023/23 budget and this was unlikely to be achieved.

It was then:

**RESOLVED**

That the forecast income and expenditure variations for the 2023/24 financial year and the overall projected deficit of £37,000 (close to a break-even position at 0.4% of the total Budget £8.588 million) be noted.

22. **Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 to 2026/27**

\*HC 22/23

Consideration was given to a report that presented the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy from 2024/25 to 2026/27.

With no issues being raised in debate, it was then:

**RESOLVED**

1. That the forecast budget gap for 2024/25 of £393,030 (4.4% of the projected Net Budget of £8.97million) and the position for future years, be noted; and
2. That the Senior Leadership Team and Hub Committee Members be tasked with bringing back further options of how to close the predicted budget gap for 2024/25, as part of future budget reports (once more detail of the Local Government Finance settlement is known), for Members' consideration

***(NOTE: THESE DECISIONS, WILL BECOME EFFECTIVE FROM 5.00PM ON THURSDAY, 28 SEPTEMBER 2023, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF MINUTE HC 15/23 -WHICH IS A RECOMMENDATION TO THE COUNCIL MEETING TO BE HELD ON 3 OCTOBER 2023, UNLESS CALLED IN, IN ACCORDANCE WITH SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES)***



The Meeting concluded at 4.00 pm

**Signed by:**

**Chairman**

---