

WEST DEVON HUB COMMITTEE



West Devon
Borough
Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **West Devon Hub Committee** held on **Tuesday, 13th December, 2022 at 2.00 pm** at the **Chamber - Kilworthy Park**

Present: **Councillors:**

Chairman Cllr Jory
Vice Chairman Cllr Edmonds

Cllr Cheadle
Cllr Mott
Cllr Vachon

Cllr Crozier
Cllr Ratcliffe
Cllr Wood

In attendance:
Councillors:

Cllr Leech (via Teams)
Cllr Pearce
Cllr Southcott (via Teams)

Cllr Moyse
Cllr Renders
Cllr Yelland

Officers:
Chief Executive
Deputy Chief Executive
Section 151 Officer
Director – Strategy & Governance
Monitoring Officer
Democratic Services Manager
Deputy Section 151 Officer
Customer Service Improvement Manager
Head of Environmental Health (via Teams)
Head of Housing
Principal Environmental Health Officer
Head of Revenues & Benefits
Assistant Director - Planning

59. **Apologies for absence**

*HC 59/22

Apologies for this meeting were received from Cllr A F Leech, who joined the meeting via Teams in a non-voting capacity

60. **Declarations of Interest**
*HC 60/22
Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be discussed but there were none made.
61. **Confirmation of Minutes**
*HC 61/22
The Minutes of the Hub Committee meeting held on 1 November 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.
62. **Public Questions**
*HC 62/22
It was noted that no Public Questions had been received in accordance with the Hub Committee Procedure Rules.
63. **Hub Committee Forward Plan**
*HC 63/22
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 noted its content.
- In discussion, it was agreed that it would be timely for a review of 'A Plan for West Devon' to be presented to a meeting of the Hub Committee during the early months of 2023 and the Leader committed to liaising with lead officers to update the Plan accordingly.
64. **Draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals 2023/24**
HC 64/22
The Committee considered a report that set out the draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals for 2023-24.
- In discussion, the following points were raised:
- a) The Section 151 Officer informed that Central Government had just published a Policy Statement on the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2023/24 to 2024/25. In summarising its contents, the officer committed to providing a detailed breakdown to all Members outside of this meeting;
 - b) A Member sought clarity on the Council's involvement in the administration of Devon County Council's Better Care Fund. In reply, it was confirmed that these Funds were passported to the Council and administered in the form of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The primary purpose of DFGs was to make adaptations to properties so as to enable residents to remain living independently within their own homes;
 - c) A Member queried the use of New Homes Bonus Funding by the Council and why this was not being directed towards the delivery of

Affordable Housing Projects. In reply, it was noted that Section 106 Monies and other funding streams (such as Housing Reserves) were available to support Affordable Housing development and that the New Homes Bonus funds were currently used to support other Capital Bids and the Revenue budget. In recognition of the recently declared Housing Crisis, the Leader stated that this current budgeting practice would be kept under review;

- d) Members wished to put on record their thanks to the Section 151 Officer and her Finance Team for the monumental effort in producing these budget papers.

It was then **RESOLVED** that:

- i) the forecast budget gap for 2023/24 of £137,296 (1.6% of the Projected Net Budget of 23/24 of £8.69million) and the position for future years be noted;
- ii) the timescales for closing the budget gap in 23/24 and future years, to achieve long term financial sustainability be noted;
- iii) the current level of Unearmarked and Earmarked Reserves set out in Appendix C of the presented agenda report be noted, as well as the net contributions to Earmarked Reserves modelled for 2023/24 (set out in Appendix A of the presented agenda report);
- iv) the outline initial proposals for the Capital Programme for 2023/24 of £905,000 as set out in Appendix D of the presented agenda report be noted (with Full Business Cases to be presented to Members as part of the January 2023 budget cycle of meetings);
- v) the views of the Hub Committee on the draft Revenue Budget Proposals and the outline capital bids for 2023/24 be noted;
- vi) the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the draft Revenue Budget Proposals and the draft Capital Budget Proposals for 2023/24, be requested at its meeting taking place on 17 January 2023;
- vii) **Council be RECOMMENDED** that West Devon Borough Council continue to be part of the Devon Business Rates Pool for 2023/24, subject to there being no announcements within the Finance Settlement (expected to be announced in mid-December), which in the opinion of the S151 Officer (in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the Hub Committee Member for Resources), would change this recommendation.

65.

Customer Access Strategy & Contact Centre Update

*HC 65/22

Consideration was given to a report that provided a progress update on the Council's Customer Access Strategy

During the ensuing debate, the following points were raised:

- (a) Although not forcing all residents to interact with the Council digitally, the improved effectiveness of the online service would encourage those who preferred to conduct their business with the Council online to do so. As a result, this would release capacity and improve effectiveness for those residents who preferred to contact the Council by telephone or book an appointment to visit in person;
- (b) Data had shown during the recent trial of the opening of the Kilworthy Park Reception that there had been very little usage. Consequently, it was proposed that the opening hours be further reduced and that it be opened on a Tuesday only, but that an appointments system be implemented to ensure the delivery of an effective service to residents. The importance of a robust Communications Strategy and clear advertising of all methods of accessing Council Services was emphasised;
- c) It was noted that the proposal to offer a Home Visiting service was to be launched imminently and would offer the most vulnerable amongst the Council's residents the opportunity to meet with Council staff in their own homes. Support was expressed for the introduction of this initiative;
- d) At this point, the Hub Advisory Group had expressed no appetite for the Council to operate a Virtual Reception facility, although Members were aware that this facility was to be trialled by South Hams District Council (SHDC) in the New Year. The Committee stated that it would view this trial with interest and, should the results of the SHDC trial merit it, it was felt that consideration should be given to implementing a similar facility at Kilworthy Park;
- e) It was requested that a progress report on the Strategy should be brought to a Hub Committee meeting during the summer of 2023 and that the Forward Plan should be updated accordingly;
- f) A Member expressed his personal view that a call answer target of five minutes was too long and an appropriate target would be three minutes. When questioned, officers advised that, for October 2022, the average call waiting time had been two and a half minutes.

It was then **RESOLVED** that:

1. the Customer Access Strategy principles and approach (as set out in section 3 of the published agenda report) be approved;
2. the approach and actions to implement the Customer Access Strategy (as set out in section 4 of the published agenda report) be endorsed;

3. the actions taken to improve the Contact Centre performance (as set out in Appendix A of the published agenda report) be noted.

66. **Cost of Living Crisis: Plans for Household Support Fund Allocation**

*HC 66/22

Members were presented with a report that provided information on the latest round of Government funding and set out a range of options for how the fund could be administered to best help those in the most need.

In his Introduction, and to help reduce damp and mould in homes, the lead Hub Committee Member felt that 'Clothes Airers' should be added to the goods listed for distribution that were set out in Recommendation 3 of the presented agenda report.

During discussion the following points were raised;

- a) In agreement with the views of the lead Member, an addition to Recommendation 3 was **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** (and when put to the vote declared **CARRIED**) that 'Clothes Airers' be added to the goods listed for distribution;
- b) Clarity was sought on how actual need would be assessed so as to ensure that those most in need would be helped. In reply, it was confirmed that the Council had a range of options at its disposal and that, as a result of the Government's guidance on the administration of the Fund being less prescriptive, the Council was able to react on a case-by-case basis;
- c) A Member queried the use of the EPC energy rating certificate as a potential marker for providing help as not all properties would hold one. In response, it was confirmed that it would not be essential for households to hold a certificate in order to receive a grant payment;
- d) Members once again stressed the need for the Fund to be widely publicised so that those who could most benefit were made aware of it. In reply, it was confirmed that, through discussions with Devon County Council, the message would be promoted through schools. In addition, it was suggested that display screens within GP Surgeries could be utilised to further increase awareness.

It was then **RESOLVED** that:

1. officers be instructed to take immediate steps to progress support payments of £650 to working age households receiving council tax reduction and not receiving passported benefits on 1 December 2022;

2. officers be instructed to take immediate steps to progress support payments of £300 to households in receipt of council tax disabled band reduction on 1 December 2022;
3. officers be instructed to work with partners to distribute slow cookers and cookbooks, electric blankets, clothes airers, warm clothing and sleeping bags to households based on need. (It is recommended that £10,000 from the Fund be ring-fenced for this purpose);
4. the use of the balance of the funding for an open application process from low income households most in need of support be approved.

67. **Housing Crisis - Changes to Financial Assistance and Enforcement Policies.**

*HC 67/22

The Hub Committee considered a report that sought approval for the implementation of two updated Council Policies.

During debate the following issues were raised:

- a) A Member queried whether or not there was a risk of some Landlords withdrawing their properties from the rental market in view of the more stringent requirements contained within the new Policies. In reply, it was confirmed that the Council would work closely with Landlords to offer advice and support but that, whilst there was a risk that some rental accommodation could be lost, this should be balanced against the importance of ensuring that our residents lived in safe and healthy accommodation;
- b) The Committee questioned the replacing of gas boilers and associated infrastructure on a 'like for like' basis and asked whether or not a greener (and more sustainable) solution should be utilised. In response, it was stated that not all properties were currently suitable for the installation of solutions such as Solar PV panels or heat pumps so, in the short term, resolving the problem was key. However, in the future (and as technology improved), this position would be subject to ongoing review.

It was then **RESOLVED** that the:

1. existing 2019-2022 Homes Assistance Policy be updated with the revised Better Care Fund Financial Assistance Policy 2022;
2. electrical safety standards Civil (Financial) Penalty Policy be approved and implemented so allowing officers to impose fines where necessary to landlords and improve Private Rented Properties; and
3. energy efficiency standards Civil (Financial) Penalty Policy be approved and implemented, so allowing officers to impose fines

where necessary to landlords and improve Private Rented Properties.

(NOTE: THESE DECISIONS WILL BECOME EFFECTIVE FROM THURSDAY 22 DECEMBER 2022, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF MINUTE HC 64/22 (PART vii) WHICH IS A RECOMMENDATION TO THE COUNCIL MEETING TO BE HELD ON 21 FEBRUARY 2023 UNLESS CALLED IN, IN ACCORDANCE WITH SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES).

The Meeting concluded at 3.05 pm

Signed by:

Chairman
