

WEST DEVON OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



West Devon
Borough
Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **West Devon Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Tuesday, 16th January, 2024 at 2.00 pm** at the **Chamber - Kilworthy Park**

Present: **Councillors:**

Chairman Cllr Kimber
Vice Chairman Cllr Johnson

Cllr Calder
Cllr Edmonds
Cllr Ewings
Cllr Jory
Cllr Renders
Cllr Southcott
Cllr Vachon
Cllr West

Cllr Daniel
Cllr Elliott
Cllr Guthrie
Cllr Mann
Cllr Saxby
Cllr Squire
Cllr Wakeham

In attendance:
Councillors:

Cllr Daniel

Cllr Wakeham (via Teams)

Officers:

Director – Customer Service & Delivery
Section 151 Officer
Assistant Director – Strategy
Head of Housing
Head of Finance (via Teams)
Head of Customer Service Improvement (via Teams)
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Director - External Liaison– South West Water
Director – Asset Management – South West Water
Area Manager – Environment Agency

16. **Apologies for Absence**
*O&S 16/23
Apologies for absence for this meeting were received from Cllrs Blackman, Casbolt and Viney

17. **Confirmation of Minutes**
*O&S 17/23
The minutes of the Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2023 were confirmed as a true and correct record.

18. **Declarations of Interest**
*O&S 18/23
There were no declarations of interests made.

19. **Public Forum**
*O&S 19/23
The Chairman confirmed that no formal requests had been received in accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

20. **South West Water and Environment Agency (Quality of River water)**
*O&S 20/23
The Director of External Liaison and the Director of Asset Management for South West Water (SWW) gave a presentation to the Committee which included a response to questions that the Committee had submitted prior to the meeting.

Key points arising from the presentation were:

An overview of SWW:

- 2 million customers and served up to 9 million people during the tourist season;
- 19,000km of pipe network;
- £300m a year investment in our region and improving our network; and
- The organisation had a Net Zero Commitment by 2030 investing in renewables across the South West.

Pollution and storm overflow monitors

- Reduce the impact on rivers by 2025, by one-third and put forward plans to target zero harm by 2030;

- Reduce spills from storm overflows to an average of 20 per year by 2025;
- Maintain the excellent bathing water quality standards, all year round, so that everyone could enjoy the 860 miles of coastline;
- Deliver zero serious pollutions by 2025, and target a year on year reduction in all pollutions;
- 100% monitoring of all storm overflows, ahead of government targets;
- 89 storm overflows in the West Devon Borough area - 31 already meet new government targets;
- One serious pollution in the West Devon Borough area since 2020;
- The Storm Overflow Action Plan (SOAP) would show when improvements would take place on each storm overflow;
- Overall SWW operations contributed to c.12% towards the reasons for not achieving good ecological status. This varied between catchments depending on the infrastructure; and
- Main catchments included: River Tavy, River Lew, Headwaters of Taw, Torridge and Dart.

The Area Manager for the Environment Agency (EA) then proceeded to deliver a presentation. In so doing, she informed that:

- the increased public interest meant that the EA could seek more resources for monitor and enforce;
- the spill numbers needed to be taken into context as the spills often occurred during very wet periods of weather and those spills were very diluted. Close monitoring on particular spills was taking place and once the investigations were concluded, the results would be published;
- there were three land and water teams consisting of 24 officers and 12 officers in the agricultural team within the Devon and Cornwall and Isles of Scilly area;
- increased numbers of freedom of information requests were taking up substantial amounts of officer time, therefore keeping people informed in a smarter way was to be pushed forward;
- a more consistent approach was needed to regulate water authorities;
- abandoned metal mines was a particular issue with regard to pollution, notably along the River Tavy.

During questions, the Director of External Liaison stated that a Category 3 incident was a minor incident, although it did still constitute pollution. He said that more monitors would be put in the fould sewers to give an earlier warning of where blockages were occurring.

In response to investment, the Director of Asset Management confirmed that £3 billion would be spent on storm overflows in the next 15 years. £1 billion over the next five-year period would have £750 million impacting on customer bills, the rest would be found through efficiency and self-funding from SWW.

Large spills from smaller sewage works were raised as a concern. Those were being addressed through operational changes and putting in additional stages of treatment as well as additional storage. He said that investigations were ongoing to find a way of stopping the amount of ground water going into those sewers. There were also land drainage connections going into the foul network, which was illegal. A Member advised that he was aware of a developer who had technical approval to connect to a sewer and wondered where the final approval was given. The Director of Asset Management reported that, in 2011, the Floods and Water Management Act, under Section 3 a Suds Authorising Body had been discussed but was never enacted. However, he stated that it was being looked at again and he was hopeful that it would be taken forward as currently they could not enforce the connections from developers into the foul sewers.

The representative also responded to a Member question on how the organisation dealt with the archaic structures, and whether they were reactive or proactive in their organisation approach to issues. He stated that there was a proactive cleaning process of the sewers which was ranked in order of how often they required cleaning to reduce blockages. They were also proactive with customers in the 'Love your Loo' public campaign, where the use of wet wipes was causing major blockages and a campaign was underway for them to be banned from sale.

In response to a question related to shareholders and dividends, the representative explained that 40% of the funding needed to be borrowed from banks and shareholders. The dividends were the means of repaying those customers for lending the money. It was noted that additional information on shareholders and dividends was set out on the Pennon website.

The Committee noted that two statutory frameworks were in place to combat climate change. One of those frameworks looked at urban creep where paving over of gardens caused more surface runoff of water. There was an organisational commitment for the vehicle fleet to be electrified by 2030.

Members were also advised that a lot of work was being done around catchment management in the rural areas.

The Environment Agency Manager stated that flooding was the bulk of the Agency's workload. Central Government was focusing on permit holders' fees and she hoped that this would help in funding the Agency and enabling a more sector-based stance on officer knowledge and enforcement.

A Member voiced their concern over wild swimming waters not being monitored as a bathing water category. The representative replied that the need for monitoring was recognised and a pilot was being carried out on the River Tamar and River Tavy. Four applications on the River Dart had been presented to the Minister and DEFRA for approval to become an inland bathing water, and the outcome would be given in March 2024.

Where leaks were visible, there was a policy in place to attend and repair within 24 hours.

In conclusion, the representatives were thanked for their informative presentations and comprehensive responses to Member questions.

Whilst a matter for the Committee to consider as part of its annual work programming considerations, some Members felt that South West Water and Environment Agency representatives should be formally invited to attend the Committee on an annual basis. Conversely, other Members felt that it would be more appropriate for a Working Group of Members to be appointed to meet with both organisations. SWW agreed to attend a working group with Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

21. **Draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals for 2024-25**

*O&S 21/23

The lead Hub Committee Member introduced the draft Revenue and Capital Budget proposals for 2024/25 to Members. The Section 151 Officer stated that in the financial year 2009/10 the authority received £3 million in Revenue Support Grant. This has been reduced to almost nil each year. To help with this the authority had to become self-financing. Working in partnership with South Hams District Council had allowed the workforce to be shared, with savings being generated of over £6 million per year.

It was explained to the Committee that negative revenue support grant was unlikely to be introduced until two years' time at the earliest.

The Council Tax Collection Rate for 2022/23 was at 98.34% and the authority was in the top quartile nationally.

The Rural Services Delivery Grant would continue next year at an amount of just over £500,000.

In response to a Member question, the Section 151 Officer informed that the Business Rate Pool had generated significant financial benefits for the Borough Council and all of the Devon Councils within the Pool. In the year of a Business Rates Baseline reset (which could be in 2026/27), it may not make financial sense to Pool in the early days, due to the risk of significant appeals having a major impact on the Business Rates Pool when the level of growth above the baseline would be a lot lower than it was currently due to the reset.

The Section 151 Officer also stated that the Council Plan would set out the Corporate Priorities and the Year 1 Delivery Plan for 2024/25 and would set out the amounts of financial resources allocated to each Theme. This would be via reports to the Hub Committee on 30 January 2024 and Full Council on 20 February 2024.

It was then **RESOLVED** that:

1. the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has given its views on the content of the Draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals for 2024/25 and supports:
 - i) Modelling an increase in Council Tax for 2024/25 of 2.99% (This would increase a Band D council tax for 24/25 from £254.00 to £261.59 – an increase of £7.59 per year or under 15 pence per week);
 - ii) The financial pressures shown in Appendix A of the published agenda report (amounting to £1,268,000);
 - iii) The savings/additional income of £(705,000) as shown in Appendix A of the published agenda report;
 - iv) The net contributions to/(from) Earmarked Reserves of £342,000 as shown in Appendix A of the published agenda report, including using £150,000 from the Business Rates Retention Earmarked Reserve, as set out in section 3.14 of the published agenda report;
 - v) The proposed use of £309,180 of New Homes Bonus funding to fund the 2024/25 Revenue Budget as set out in section 3.20 of the published agenda report; and

- vi) The proposed two capital bids (total of £140,000) set out in section 8.4 of the published agenda report and the proposal to finance these from New Homes Bonus funding.

22.

Performance Report -April to November 2023

*O&S 22/23

The Assistant Director of Strategy and Organisational Development and the Lead Hub Committee Member took Members through the published agenda report.

In so doing, it was noted that:

- (a) The Freedom Of Information (FOI) requests were off track to time scales. 62 requests were received with 52 being responded to on time. 90% was the target figure to be met on time.
- (b) Missed bin collection rates were slightly off target due to a couple of the vehicles being off the road with technical issues.
- (c) The answering of revenues and benefits service calls was under the target of being answered in under 8 minutes. The Director of Customer Services and Delivery stated that the service area had been rearranged to take their own calls and at the start there had been a big improvement, but it had slipped back recently. The team was giving him weekly feedback on performance.
- (d) The Head of Housing stated that there were currently 25 people in temporary accommodation which was more than the average for November of 16.8 people. There were 5 families and 20 singles, 3 of which were there under the rough sleepers emergency accommodation provision due to cold weather. It was recognised that the proposals at 20 Plymouth Road would make a difference. In addition, the Springhill project was progressing.

It was then **RESOLVED** that:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee note:

1. The Key Performance Indicators for April 2023 -November 2023; and
2. The intention to review some Key Performance Indicators to provide more helpful information for Members in the future.

23.

2023/24 Committee Annual Work Programme

*O&S 23/23

The Director of Customer Service and Delivery said that, once the Council's Corporate Plan and Year 1 Delivery Plan was approved by Full Council, then Lead Hub Committee Members for a particular theme would be invited to attend Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings to report on targets and achievements.

The Meeting concluded at 4.30 pm

Signed by:

Chairman
