

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Confidential minutes of a Meeting of the Rationalisation Panel held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 13 October 2010

Present: **Councillors:**
Graham Brown (Chairman)
Vivienne Ash
Ray Bloxham
Vivien Duval Steer
Marion Olive
Philip Skinner
Tim Wood

Also Present **Councillors:**
David Cox
Jill Elson
Douglas Hull

Officers:
Denise Lyon, Deputy Chief Executive
Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director
Andrew Hancock, Acting Streetscene Manager
Diana Vernon, Democratic Services Manager

Apologies: **Councillor**
Ken Potter

The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 4.20 pm

*49 **Report of last meetings**

The report of the meeting of the Rationalisation Panel held on 28 September 2010 was noted.

50 **Town and Parish Councils**

Denise Lyon, Deputy Chief Executive, invited the Panel to explore the potential for developing different arrangements for services currently provided by Streetscene. She advised that the Streetscene operations team had undertaken a 'brain storming' exercise and the suggestions on different ways of working, how services could be paid for and who might be willing to pay were included within the agenda papers to trigger debate. The Panel was asked which services it might consider could be provided in a different way, (such as through partnership working with parish and town councils) and the services which the Panel would not wish to consider changing.

Diccon Pearse, Corporate Director advised that the Panel needed to think about the services which were currently at risk should funding be cut and if these should be protected or provided in a different way due to their benefit to the community. He questioned whether the Council should adopt a standard approach across the district or an approach tailored to local circumstances. Should the Council continue to provide the service, or ask for payment or cease to provide? Should existing services areas be 'packaged' to include some which had income potential, some which would represent a cost and some for which the Council could be contracted to provide at cost? He gave Lynmouth Town Council as an example of this approach – Lynmouth had taken over responsibility for providing street cleaning, public toilets, beaches and car parks and now provided a more effective and cost efficient service.

50 Town and Parish Councils (cont)..

In respect of dog bins, the Portfolio Holder – Streetscene advised that their maintenance had to be carried out by professionals in compliance with health and safety legislation and was currently included in the SITA contract. However it was possible for the local councils to pay for the service rather than the district council.

In reply to concerns about timescales for town councils' budget preparations, the Panel was advised that the towns had been made aware of EDDC's budget issues during regular meetings. Any major changes and transfers would be phased. However some services, such as responsibility for toilets and bearing the cost of dog bins, potentially could be transferred quite easily. Possible areas for transferring service delivery were to be discussed in the autumn in advance of the local councils' budget setting process.

There was concern that in trying to deliver a balanced budget, local councils would have to increase their precepts which could be liable to capping (subject to the Government plans which were yet to be announced). Similarly if the Council cascaded money to the local councils to undertake some aspects of service delivery, the problem of where the money would come from would still have to be addressed.

Councillor Bloxham, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee reminded the Panel that asset management was to be discussed at a special meeting of the Committee on 18 October to which all Councillors were invited to attend and contribute. He suggested that the Panel's debate about asset transfer should be deferred until after that meeting. The Co-ordinating Committee would be asked to consider asset management in a holistic way. For example transferring responsibility for a car park to a town council would provide that town with an income. However currently the income from the car park benefited the whole district; strategic use of assets could facilitate re-generation.

The Panel discussed whether or not there should be a consistent approach to asset and service transfer to local councils. Some local councils were in a position to be able to take on additional responsibility but some were not. It was suggested that certain towns, such as those on the coast, may have to meet the higher expectations of tourists although others on the Panel felt that the district as a whole attracted tourism. The Panel was reminded that inland towns attracted tourists and the Thelma Hulbert Gallery and Honiton Street Market were given as examples. Grass roots service provision had the benefit of targeting resources to local needs and the management of allotments was used as an example. The Panel felt that a consistent approach was the way forward but that this would achieve different outcomes due to local needs and circumstance.

The Panel discussed the concept of town hubs, which would include surrounding rural areas and settlements, with these catchment areas contributing to the cost of the town facilities. Councillor Skinner, Member Champion – Rural advised that the Local Development Framework process had looked at the hub concept. He questioned whether all towns had the capacity to take on extra services; the Panel needed to look at the wider picture, capability, costs and long-term goals.

Consideration was given to the function of the district council as enabler rather than provider. The Acting Streetscene Manager asked the Panel to bear in mind that the Council's Streetscene service was structured to take advantage of economies of scale. If some parts of the service were provided by alternative means, Streetscene's fixed costs (including staffing and machinery) would still have to be met. It was suggested that the Council could provide a basic service with local councils providing a service 'up-grade'. For example additional grass cuts or flower beds.

The Panel was reminded that it was not always easy to recruit volunteers. Those recruited would need particularly during the transfer process.

50 **Town and Parish Councils (cont)..**

It was suggested that local businesses could sponsor flower beds and roundabouts. The Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee advised that the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee had discussed Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) at its last meeting. This initiative aimed to bring groups and organisations together and were reliant on the community helping itself to raise its economic profile.

There was concern that the district council was the driver and that local councils were being expected to undertake service delivery that the district council was no longer able to provide. Genuine partnership working achieved through effective dialogue/negotiation was essential. This could result in saving a service/facility that would otherwise be lost.

Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director suggested that a helpful way forward would be to measure the community benefit and aim to achieve 'win win' outcomes. He put forward the following models, all of which would require proper and genuine consultation between EDDC and the local council(s):

- The service/facility is no longer required and can be cut; no one pays,
- The service/facility is transferred to an alternative provider to achieve savings/efficiencies.
- The service/facility is funded by different means - a different funding model – the example given was the intention for Seaton's Voice to take over the running of Seaton Town Hall which could be achieved at a reduced costs and potentially increase use.

All of the above would achieve community benefits either with a more locally focused service or through efficiencies and cost savings.

The Chairman said that the Council was justifiably proud of the existing Streetscene service.

Consideration was given to the paper included in the agenda following the Streetscene 'brainstorming' referred to at the start of this meeting. The Panel agreed to defer discussion around assets as this would be discussed on 18 October 2010 by the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee.

Leisure East Devon – currently did not pay for the full cost of services provided by EDDC. Although EDDC provided a subsidised service, LED was achieving a surplus (ploughed back into the service). Would it be cheaper for LED to seek support services from outside the Council? LED had already taken over responsibility for accountancy and payroll and was achieving efficiencies and cost savings. The current contractual arrangements were under review. The Council needed (and wanted) LED to be successful. It was suggested that EDDC's charges to LED could be increased to better reflect the cost of services provided.

Peter Jeffs reminded the Panel of the need to seek community benefit (see model approaches above). He suggested that EDDC enter into negotiations with LED to achieve 'win win' based on sound commercial principles and using accurate cost data of the service currently provided by Streetscene.

(Councillor David Cox declared a personal interest in LED as one of EDDC's appointed representatives.)

50 **Town and Parish Councils (cont)..**

Customer Service Centre – high re-charge costs to Streetscene. The Panel asked for the percentage of calls that were being dealt with by the CSC as a one-stop-shop and the percentage of calls that were being referred to the 'back office' services to deal with. The CSC was provided as a corporate service; Streetscene would not be able to withdraw from the current arrangements and provide its own answering service without this causing a major impact on the viability of the centre.

However, if costs of the CSC were reduced at source, the cost to the Streetscene service would be proportionally reduced. The centre provided a good service which was rated highly by the public. However, it was important to understand how much the CSC could handle at one-stop and how much they were simply passing on. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that the centre was target/time driven and this pressure was possibly contributing to call handling issues and complaints from services that calls were passed on incorrectly. It was anticipated that the number of incoming calls and problems of peak demand would be reduced when the final phase of the recycling and refuse initiative had been rolled out. There would be then be potential to review staffing levels.

Sidmouth allotments – these were currently administered by the district council. The Sidmouth allotments were on housing (Manstone estate), cemetery (Peaslands) and National Trust (Lawn Vista and Lymebourne) land but responsibility for their maintenance and administration could be transferred to the town council.

Street sweepers – the Council currently paid Beer Parish Council to fund a street sweeper; Streetscene emptied the bins. If this model was rolled out district wide it would reduce supervision costs although it was recognised that it would be more feasible in the villages. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that she was working with the Streetscene teams to establish area working around a town hub for service delivery. When drawn up this would be used as a basis for discussion with towns about service delivery/provision - what services did they need? What could be cut? Was the service provided to a good standard?

Play areas – It was suggested that associated liability and maintenance might deter local councils from taking on this responsibility. However the Panel felt that raising potential transfer of responsibility with local councils would lead to a useful debate.

Waste bins and dog bins – The Portfolio Holder – Streetscene advised that there was merit in asking local councils to pay for bin provision and maintenance above the minimal level supplied by the district council. It was vital for any bins to be sited in the right location. Discussions with the local councils on optimum siting of bins would be useful, with those bins currently in the wrong place being removed or re-located. At the same time, local councils should be given the option to pay for additional bins which would be provided centrally by the district council. The Panel was mindful that providing bins did not mean that litter problems would be resolved. The public needed to be educated into either using bins provided or taking their rubbish home.

Toilets – The Panel discussed the standard of toilet provision and whether it would be better to transfer responsibility to local councils. The Panel recognised that visitors often judged an area by the state of its public toilets. The Council currently maintained 44 public toilets compared with 19 in South Somerset. It would be useful to check that all of these toilets were required. Public toilet provision was an emotive subject and the Council had been much criticised in the past when toilets had been closed. However, the Chairman reminded the Panel that the Council had to make cuts and could not continue to provide the same levels of service in the same way. The Acting Streetscene Manager suggested that the siting of toilets could be reviewed with the possibility of using the often valuable town centre/seafront sites for alternative development opportunities and rebuilding toilets deemed essential on nearby (cheaper) locations. Alternatively toilet provision could be out-sourced - provided in a different way.

50 **Town and Parish Councils (cont)..**

Cemeteries – The Council had no choice but to take on cemeteries. However there was potential to discuss maintenance responsibilities with local councils as cemeteries had income potential and provided a service to the local community.

- RECOMMENDED**
- (1) that the Council enters into negotiations with Leisure East Devon to maintain on-going service provision but with the intention of reducing the Council's financial contribution and/or charging LED more realistically for EDDC support services,
 - (2) that the Deputy Chief Executive lead a review of the Customer Service Centre to try to achieve efficiencies, improved service delivery and a reduction in overheads/corporate costs, and report back on possible options to a future meeting of the Panel,
 - (3) that dialogue be entered into with Sidmouth Town Council in respect of the local council potentially taking over responsibility (administration and maintenance) for the Sidmouth allotments,
 - (4) that the Deputy Chief Executive work with one of the Town Councils (Honiton was suggested) during the Streetscene redesign on an area basis experiment and report back to a future meeting of the Panel for discussion,
 - (5) that Peter Jeffs, Corporate Director look into possible transfer of responsibility for play areas to local councils (leasing being the preferred option) and report back to the Panel,
 - (6) that negotiation be entered into with local councils in respect of provision and location of bins,
 - (7) that the Council negotiate with local councils on the on-going provision and siting of toilets throughout the district – were these on the right site, could the site be used for alternative uses, could provision be out-sourced or provided in a different way?
 - (8) that the potential transfer of cemetery maintenance to local councils be discussed with relevant parish and town councils.

*51 **Date of next meeting**

To be confirmed.