

1. The External Auditors, Grant Thornton have finally released their report on East Devon District Council 2021/22

The report raises some extremely concerning issues-

Eg. p. 6- Governance

Standards- Poor working relationships between certain officers and members led to a breakdown in the operating effectiveness of some governance arrangements at the Council in 2021/22 and 2022/23.

'There were allegations of bullying behaviour by both officers and members. [The Auditors] saw evidence of some officers leaving the organisation, as well as suggestions that members did not stand for re-election, as result of the behaviours and culture that was reported within the council.it is clear to us that relationships within the council had resulted in an unacceptable culture.

Cultural issues were also identified in reports produced by another third party organisation.'

See Recommendation 1. P 10 'The Council should recognise that it has been given clear, consistent evidence of the existence of cultural issues and continue to implement actions to address the behaviours which have given rise to this culture.....'

Why/ Impact 'Cultural issues have resulted in significant weaknesses in the Council's governance system....'

Informed decisions-

[The auditors] saw evidence that suggested there was sometimes a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of officers and members, which could impact on decision making, and linked to some of the cultural issues [the auditors] identify earlier.

See Recommendation 2. P 11

Update- The report was debated at the Audit and Governance committee meeting on Thursday 14 Dec 23. <https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=149&MId=2245&Ver=4>
During the debate I expressed serious concern about the bullying and that this was the third external report to have found bullying. Recommendations from the previous reports designed to improve matters had not been carried out and the problem was still present. Staff well-being was my first concern.

Following the debate, I was contacted by the political editor of BBC SW and interviewed for a piece on Spotlight. The Leader of the Council was also interviewed and denied knowledge of any bullying, despite the findings in the Grant Thornton Audit report. This is surprising and concerning in view of the evidence.

2. Public Toilets-

The Overview Committee considered this matter-

<https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=2103&Ver=4>

See officer report at item 23.

It was agreed-

1. To extend the closing date and any necessary revenue budgets for Category B and C Sites [eg. Colyton Dolphin St toilets] until 31st March 2025, to allow a further 12 months to enable an urgent revisiting of negotiations with town and parish councils to look at freehold disposals and other changes to the offer, according to a specified timetable and including a renewed effort through Ward Members to engage town and parish councils, with the reality of reduced or removed public toilet provision at the sites, should agreement not be reached.

2. For this Council to write to the Secretary of State to push for public toilets to become a statutory service, and to invite other councils in Devon and Cornwall to also do so.

3. Link to Residents' Update

<https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKEDDC/bulletins/383adb1>

4. The Council is preparing for a Peer Review, to take place shortly- a team of officers and cllrs from other councils carry out a review, and report on the efficiency of the council. The last Peer Review took place in 2019 and the findings were very positive, but the current Leader of EDDC and several other Lib Dem and Independent Cllrs voted not to accept the report. It will be interesting to see the findings of this coming review.