

East Devon Alliance Research and Investigations.

We believe that all Council decisions should be evidence-based.

To promote our core principles of Democracy, Transparency and Accountability in local government EDA members have conducted detailed research and investigations which have resulted in dossiers and reports as well as submissions of formal evidence to parliamentary and other official inquiries.

2012/13: Report on the East Devon Business Forum sent to all councillors.

Summary:

Between 2004-13 EDDC subsidised a lobby group of developers and landowners that had a disproportionate influence on planning policy and decisions in our district.

Such an arrangement risked serious conflicts of interest for councillors who were members of EDBF representing their own or other people's business interests, and to council officers who were seconded to the Forum and facilitated its lobbying activities.

This risk was illustrated in 2013 when chair of the EDBF Cllr Graham Brown was exposed in the Daily Telegraph offering to obtain planning permission for money, and creating a local and national scandal.

February 2014: Complaint to the International Institute of Internal Auditors about South West Audit Partnership's (SWAP) report on governance implications of the Brown affair (July 2013)

Summary:

EDDC's internal auditors failed to adequately investigate the implications of the Brown scandal producing a report that was anodyne and "box-ticking" with no serious recommendations to prevent future similar conflicts of interest.

We submitted evidence to suggest that the relationship between the council and its internal auditors is too close and risks precluding objective assessment of council performance.

In response, the IIA criticised SWAP for sweeping, positive comments about the council which lacked evidence.

December 2015: Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs Inquiry into the Economics of the United Kingdom Housing Market.

Summary:

Accommodation to buy or rent is unaffordable for many average wage-earners in East Devon.

The housing market is manipulated by big developers leading to price inflation, and the private sector has failed to provide the affordable housing needed

EDA made positive recommendations to reduce the cost of private ownership and rented accommodation and to address the shortage of social housing.

Feb 2016: Submission to Department of Communities and Local Government's Consultation on Proposed Changes to the National Planning Policy

Summary:

The Departmental consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF included such topics as: affordable housing; creation of commuter hubs; planning new settlements; use of brownfield sites; and supporting delivery of starter homes. None of the proposals, in our view, will produce genuinely affordable homes but only offer subsidies to investors. The Right-to-Buy Housing Associations will deplete the number of homes available for social renting.

March 2016: Comments to Public Accounts Committee on Local Enterprise Partnership accountability and value for money

Summary:

Devolution is regarded by most as having the potential to benefit growth in local economies. But EDA's experience of this process from our Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Heart of the South West, is one of: haphazard regional grouping; a self-selecting LEP board, unrepresentative of our rural economy, working with no transparency, scrutiny or accountability. This has resulted in a devolution proposal based on heroic assumptions rather than any hard-headed appraisal.

May 2016: Submission to Home Office departmental consultation – Action Plan for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist finance

Summary:

EDA supported the proposal to introduce Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWO) as a way of countering money-laundering and counter-terrorist financing. Money-laundering thrives when corruption becomes rife and an accepted part of everyday life in society. The lead to stop this must come by ensuring the highest level of transparency and probity in public life and by fostering the expectation that these are the norm. We suggested the Home Office went further to consider criminalising illicit enrichment or “obtaining financial advantage by use of a public position” as a way of countering corruption generally. We presented evidence that 47% of people felt that UK local government was affected by corruption.

May 2016: Technical consultation on implementation of planning changes to NPPF

Summary:

EDA submitted comments on this consultation on a number of technical aspects of proposed revisions to the NPPF. They covered: the granting of “Planning Permission in Principle”; identification and registration of Brownfield sites; registration of small sites; and competition for the processing of planning applications. The proposals seem to ignore the role of local communities. There is a clear need for a reformed, simpler and fairer planning system responsive to local needs. The danger in speeding up the planning process is that it could result in rubber-stamping and lack of public scrutiny. The proposals do little to encourage quality development in the right places or provide necessary infrastructure, or protect the green environment. Nor do the proposals address the exploitation of the planning system through slow build-out rates and land-banking.

March 2017: Submission to the Department of Communities and Local Government’s inquiry into Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government

Summary:

Overview and scrutiny is inadequate at EDDC because of dominant one-party Cabinet control, obstruction by senior officers, and a lack of strong, independent monitoring.

Local Enterprise Partnerships which play an increasing role in economic planning are largely undemocratic and unaccountable.

Among other recommendations we suggest the revival of adequate central government supervision of local authorities, and the replacement of the Cabinet System by executive committees.

April 2017: Draft Submission to Parliamentary health committee inquiry on NHS Sustainability & Transformation Plans started but cancelled by General Election.

Summary:

EDA was in the process of selecting a drafting team when this select committee inquiry into Sustainability & Transformation Plans (STP) was interrupted by the 2017 general election. It was not continued when the new Government formed. We had begun to assemble evidence on: the local context of STPs; our experience of issues with governance, management and leadership; concerns over the impact STPs will have on the delivery of care to patients; and questioning how effective STPs have been in joining up health and social care.

September 2017: Submission to Government White Paper on “the Right Homes in the Right Places

Summary:

The current housing crisis results from a planning system which favours expensive homes in the wrong places, such as greenfield sites.

Large developers have profited hugely and have manipulated the market by land-banking which has pushed up house prices, and increased rents.

We outline radical changes to increase the supply of truly affordable homes to buy, as well as social housing to rent.

November 2017: East Devon Alliance analysis and comment on the draft Heart of the South West (HotSW) Productivity Strategy

Summary:

“Our ambition is simple - to double the economy in 18 years (2018 to 2036)” HotSW. This would require a growth rate of 4%, which is totally unrealistic. Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has reduced its forecast of average growth rate in GDP to 1.4% up to 2022. EDA, however, does agree with HotSW that with full employment and in the light of Brexit, growing the local economy by placing emphasis on productivity growth rather than employment growth through immigration is the only way to achieve it. It is disappointing to find that a number of key issues are avoided: is productivity stagnation a temporary diversion or a signal of permanent weakness? Also there is no quantitative analysis or discussion in the paper of the implications of our ageing population. Without a hard-headed approach to the problems facing the local economy no practical strategy is going to emerge.

March 2018; Submission to Government Consultation on “Fixing our Broken Housing Market”

Summary:

The government proposals offer even less protection to the environment and fail signally to provide low-cost housing, including for social rent. The changes still allow developers to exploit the planning system at the expense of local authorities and their communities.

May 2018: Submission to Government Consultation on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework

Summary:

The new NPPF fails to address the key issues involved in building the right homes in the right places through a presumption in favour of “sustainable” development and the requirement for a 5-year land supply.

The proposals will fail to enforce build-out rates, or to encourage the provision of “affordables”, and social housing.

Instead they will facilitate development in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Parks, and Green-belt, and provide little protection for prime farmland.

July 2018 EDA: submission to CSPL review on Standards in Public Life

Summary:

Dominant one-party control, especially where exercised, through a cabinet system threatens standards of democracy, transparency and accountability in local government, particularly concerning conflicts of interest in planning matters.

Sanctions against councillors for serious violations of codes of conduct are inadequate, and the Localism Act has removed effective central government scrutiny of local government standards.

It is urgent to overhaul the system of monitoring, audit and scrutiny within local authorities, and to encourage the greater involvement of communities in the decisions which shape their lives.

October 2018: Submission to NAO Study on Local Government Governance and Accountability

Summary:

EDA presented four fully-referenced case studies where local governance and accountability failed to pick up or deal adequately with weaknesses in applying Nolan Principles. These included reference to the Graham Brown case of 2013; failure in EDDC to account for S106 monies 2014 to 2016; the EDDC Knowle HQ exercise with no business case and ineffective scrutiny (site sold for £7.5M now has a developable value of £50M); newly introduced scrutiny arrangements for Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) has no public participation. We made six recommendations for improvement.

December 2018: Submission to Glover Review of England's National Parks and AONBs

Summary:

EDA supports the proposal to create a Dorset and East Devon National Park (NP) and requests the Glover Review panel to ask Natural England to undertake a full assessment. This Dorset & East Devon NP, working with partners including councils and communities, voluntary societies, land managers and business would make a vital contribution to landscape-scale conservation. We believe this would bring an economic boost to the area. We note the South Downs NP has attracted over £100M in core support and project funding since 2011 and it is reasonable to expect a Devon and Dorset NP to attract a similar level of funding. Improving public enjoyment would go hand in hand with promoting activities to improve the health and well-being of an ageing population and tourism. Improving health and well-being will become an overriding priority in our area which already has more than 30% of the population aged 65 or over.

2018: Research Paper on the History of the Knowle Sale

Summary:

The story of EDDC's office re-location from Knowle, Sidmouth epitomises the Council's lack of transparency, its dubious manipulation of the planning process and its economic incompetence. It also entailed the loss of an important local public asset, including historic buildings and the best of a public park.