

Annual Chairman's Report Policy Development Group

Managing the Environment

April 2013 – March 2014

During the last 12 months the group have been engaged on a number of important projects, which in due course will have a significant impact as to future policy on services supplied by the Authority.

Waste and Recycling Service

The main thrust of the group during 2013/14 has been the question of future policy relating to the above subject, which in the view of the majority of the public delivers a good service. Therefore, in the current economic situation, it was important to consider all aspects of current and future delivery of this service, especially as MDDC had inherited an elderly recycling fleet that needed to be upgraded for the benefit of all concerned. Allied to that was the critical finance required to process this undertaking. During 2013, MDDC had improved the waste fleet and it was now necessary to undertake investment of the recycling fleet.

Initial reports were raised and debated by the Group, then enhanced by an 'away day' in July attended by a wider group than the PDG Members, during which many ideas/suggestions were aired, giving a steer towards future policy. In September a recommendation was made to cabinet outlining aims and desires concerning the future of waste services and the steps that needed to be taken to achieve this goal. Cabinet supported the recommendation that would see the report coming back to the PDG with a detailed and costed analysis of future commitment. In November following full debate/discussion on reports received a recommendation was made to the Cabinet as to the future commitments to the waste and recycling service. This was supported by the Cabinet. Part of the recommendation to Full Council, debated and supported in February 2014, was to commence a procurement process for replacing the existing recycling fleet, which over the course of the last year has seen the maintenance budget hugely increased. The future looks bright, and in the forthcoming months much work will need to be carried out to fulfil those aims.

Other matters that have been in in the PDG programme this year included:

Smoke Free Play Areas

This subject was discussed/debated and resolved that MDDC progress a scheme to erect free signage in play areas within the Authorities jurisdiction. The actual signage (graphics) used were as designed by school children outlining their concerns of smoking in their play areas. The work undertaken by Cllr D Coren is appreciated by the PDG in setting up contacts and the final outcome.

Dog Control Orders

The policy relating to the above topic came into force in December 2012. However further discussion took place within the PDG to clarify certain responsibilities and coverage of the order, this was achieved.

Wild Flower Meadow

At the July 2013 PDG meeting it was decided that trial planting of best flora be undertaken in grounds under the control of MDDC.

The Open Spaces and Cemetery Team, in an area of Tiverton Cemetery, created three trial beds of assorted wild flora, the aim being to study the best flora planted that could in future be used in other areas of MDDC owned parkland, in order to encourage wildlife to otherwise sterile parts.

Following these trials it is deemed that during 2014 other areas will be seeded using the results of best flora. It is a small step to work with nature but an important one and the PDG is mindful of the enthusiasm shown by Cllr J Downes to take this project forward.

Flood Risk Management

The PDG were given a presentation in November 2013 by the Flood Risk Manager (Devon County Council) relating to the new proposed strategy for local flood risk. Earlier in the year (July) the PDG had taken account of the latest MDDC Emergency Plan and this presentation showed how the proposed strategy could fit in with these plans, in that, it proposed to draw all current policies, guidelines and documents relating to local flood defence into one Policy and would allow partnership working and undertakings to create better schemes. A further presentation is due to be given to the Group in March/May 2014 so it will be interesting to note what lessons have been learnt following the recent inclement weather, and whether the future aims of the proposed strategy can be implemented into our existing emergency plan.

Local Air Quality Issues

A report to the PDG was submitted following the annual report to DEFRA.

The outcome of that report showed that concentrations outside the Air Quality Management areas in both Cullompton and Crediton (both towns being part of the LAQM's) were below the objectives set which is good news, however concentrations of nitrogen dioxide remained above air quality objectives in both towns. Only time will tell if the new road at Crediton will have an effect on future reduced figures. The MDDC website shows daily updated graphs and figures, these can be found under air quality.

Also discussed by the PDG during the year were Financial Monitoring, Performance and Risk, Recycling Campaign, Drains/Flooding along with an update on the 'Paint it Pink Campaign' undertaken in Cullompton during October 2013 highlighting the incidence of dog poo. A big thank you has been given to the Officers involved and Cllr Mrs N Woolatt, they all entered into the spirit of the event and it is hoped that during 2014, this campaign will be widened in its scope.

Finally it has been an exciting year, and 2014 will hopefully see the outcome of much debate/discussion that this PDG has undertaken during 2013/14, which based on various recommendations made and supported will see a better prepared and fit for purpose authority, keen to meet the challenges.

In closing this report may I thank all Members for their keen observations, their time spent on debating matters before them and their support to me, it is much appreciated. It is also pleasing to note that the PDG are fully committed to improving the quality of service that MDDC give to the community. My thanks again to a great team of Officers who by their expertise and professional attitude make my dealings with them a pleasure, it has been good fun with the hard work.

Finally I need to single out Mrs Sally Gabriel who over many years has held my hand and guided me through the minefield of legal understanding and most importantly has put up with my manner in the Chair, one needs fortitude in this respect, thank you Sally. I am more than sure that Ms Julia Stuckey will continue to assist and help this PDG in the future.

Here ends my report for 2013/14.

M A Lucas

Chairman

PDG (MTE)

Annual Audit report for 2013/14

Meeting of the 14th May 2013.

The first order of business was to re-elect Cllr Sarah Fox as Chair and Cllr Martin Bink as Vice Chair.

The internal audit charter was discussed and we were informed by Catherine Yendle (Audit team leader) that where the Charter referred to the "Board" that was actually the "Committee", the "Management board" was actually "The management team" and the "audit executive" was indeed the "Audit team leader."

At this point that the representative from the plain English campaign left the room.

There followed a debate on Motion 470 brought to council at the meeting on 6th March that had been referred to the audit committee to consider.

Include a provision for a shadow cabinet or include a provision for members of the opposition to appoint lead members.

The motion was discussed and although it was agreed had merit it was thought that it may be better placed to discuss following the next round of elections given the fragmentation of the current opposition.

It was resolved that council be recommended to reject the motion.

The all-important Audit fee`s for the 2013/14 year were discussed, council should note these fees are set by the audit commission, the Fee`s for 2013/14 had been set at £62,700 these were the same as the fee`s for 2012/13

Meeting of June 25th

Council will note the first of several committee member changes; the committee welcomed Cllr Frank Rosamond in replacement of Cllr Linda Holloway.

There followed a detailed report on the "Internal audit outturn report for 2012/13, members were reminded that we had received Two "Poor" reports, it was reported that both area`s had made improvements and that the general trend was a greater proportion of recommendations being completed on time across all areas.

Draft annual report and accounts for 2013/13:

All cash balances were as predicted

The general fund balance had closed at just over £2.6m and housing revenue at £2m, the committee were shown a table detailing numerous financial accounts and it was clear that the financial monitoring throughout 2012/13 had been extremely accurate.

It was concluded that overall the Council was in a strong financial position to deal with known challenges.

Committee were asked to note a possible £621k shortfall year on year of central government funding.

Special meeting 30th July 2013

This special meeting had been called so members could receive detail and assurances around required, **sources of assurance for the Annual Governance Statement**

The Head of Communities and Governance presented each of the objective areas used to compile the sources of assurances for the A.G.S. Members of the Committee questioned the HOCG on all opinions where it stated only a 'partial' reliance could be placed upon a particular control rather than a 'full' reliance.

Meeting of 24th September

It was at this meeting that the Committee was informed at the resignation of Cllr Sara Fox not only as Chair of the Audit Committee but from the council in general, it would be remiss of me not to remind council at this point of the excellent work Cllr Fox had undertaken and she was and is missed from not only the Audit meeting but from this chamber.

There followed a brief election where I was given the formidable task of following Cllr Fox as Chair of the committee, however at this point I still had the reasoned had of Cllr Martin Bink as vice chair.

The annual report and accounts were presented following known minor amendments to reflect accuracy in reporting and the accounts were approved

The annual governance statement was also presented in its final version and members also approved for acceptance and signature by the chief executive.

Grant Thornton's audit report was presented as a true and accurate report of the councils financial statements and that all measure to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness were sufficient.

There followed a progress report on the 2013/14 audit, were discussions took place around a number of specific reports, it was resolved that given concerns raised by Cllr Binks that the councils purchasing card system be monitored more closely so that committee could receive reports on a more regular basis.

Meeting 19th November 2013

The committee had received six internal audit updates on Housing Homeless persons, Development management, Gifts and Hospitality, Income and cash collection, Housing rents and Creditors all received a conclusion of adequately controlled.

Meeting 14th January 2014

More changes and a First for the Council

At the start of the meeting it was announced that the meeting was to be recorded I was told at the first meeting the recording had failed so Audit was the first meeting to be recorded, copies are available on the web page and all Audit committee members would be willing to sign any tapes members may have to hand at the end of this briefing.

Committee were informed that Cllr Martin Binks had been lost to the committee due to a political rebalancing requirement, again a sad loss to the audit family and I would like to thank Cllr Binks for his work whilst on the Audit Committee.

Cllr Ray Radford joined and Cllr Frank Rosamond was elected as Vice Chair.

Performance and risk

The Committee had before it, a report from the Head of Communities and Governance providing Members with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

Scrutiny Committee now had a working group in place to look at performance and how it was reported, to make sure that it was information that Members wanted to see and also looking at how the information was presented. Currently information reported was what Officers had decided to report, the working group would be debating what Members actually wanted to see.

Internal audit progress report

Core audits had commenced in September 2013 and seven had been completed so far, as well as nine systems audits.

Internal audit reports

The Committee had received two Internal Audit reports since their last meeting. These were Trade Waste and Council Tax & NNDR It was the overall opinion of the internal auditor that both were adequately controlled.

Certification work report

The Auditor confirmed that the report was good news, that all claims were submitted on time and that no claim required amending or qualification. The working papers and evidence provided were good, which had enabled certification within the deadlines. There were no recommendations, errors or problems identified.

I would like to Thank Andrew Jarrett and Amy Tregellas and their teams for not only the amount of work but the quality of work undertaken, this adds to the overall continuing trend of well maintained, well reported, accurate Audits and reports to the Committee and ultimately full council, also all member services officers and Audit committee members for their diligence, hard work and at times patience in an occasional fact based committee but one that is both valuable and appreciated by Council.

Decent and Affordable Homes Policy Development Group

Chairman's Report March 2014

The PDG has once again had a busy year of meetings which has seen it involved in discussions on a great many subjects which affect our ability to provide a high standard of housing service, which quite rightly our tenants expect and hopefully receive.

It is pleasing to see that members of the Scrutiny Improvement Group (SIG) have attended some of our meetings, their input through their own meetings has also provided very useful information in our decision making process and it is hoped that this will continue.

During the year we have seen the completion of the building of a number of local authority houses at Well Parks in Crediton, the first we have built for many years. These affordable homes are a much needed and welcome addition to our housing stock.

Our housing teams continue to work proactively to ensure that our tenants have access to a highly rated housing service, their emphasis on prompt rent payment has paid dividends which are shown in the arrears figures we are now achieving. This is something we must work diligently on as ongoing changes in the Benefit System could impact on this severely

Our maintenance department have been effective in meeting the ever increasing need to reduce costs, whilst continuing to maintain a service to our tenants at a very high level. This will be an ongoing challenge as we face decreasing budgets but we remain confident that our management teams and workforce will sustain the level of service going forward.

This year has seen our committee meeting being recorded for access by our tenants and the general public, can I thank the committee members for their efforts in maintaining the protocols expected for this system to be effective.

As Chairman my sincere thanks must go to all committee members, to our cabinet member for housing Cllr Ray Stanley for his regular attendance and all his assistance and guidance.

To Nick Sanderson , Head of Housing and all his dedicated team for all their hard work in providing information to allow us to make recommendations and decisions, and their continued hard work in reducing rent arrears, maintaining quick turnarounds on voids and repairs.

To the Head of finance and his team, especially Rod Hewson who has attended all our meetings for the clear and understandable way they have keep the committee up to date with finances.

Also thank you to other Officers who throughout the year have attended meetings

and provided information that we have requested

And finally my personal thanks are extended to Sarah Lees and Julia Stuckey for their ever present assistance in producing reports, agendas and providing updates in a clear and concise format.

I look forward to working with you all as we move into a new year of meetings to face the challenging times ahead .

Peter Heal
Chairman.

Community Well-being Policy Development Group
Chairman's Report May 2013/April 2014

The year commenced with gestures rather than anything concrete – a recommendation to cabinet to provide a letter supporting Cullompton's swimming pool campaign , but no money attached. We agreed to support Mrs Roach's Motion 472 to approve the Dignity Code of the National Pensioners Convention and to become a signatory. No one can argue with this but from my observations it is something staff and councillors do as a matter of course.

Economic regeneration or lack of, has been discussed in detail. It requires some divine inspiration. That does not mean the enormous efforts put in by officers, especially Amy Tregellas, and councillors Sue Griggs and Richard Chesterton to name a few, are not greatly appreciated. Unfortunately national factors such as a London centric economy, the recession and the recent weather all conspire to make recovery difficult for Mid Devon. On a positive note we were glad that after its difficult rebirth Lords Meadow Leisure Centre is now running successfully with increased membership. It meets with public approval and we have an inspired staff running the centre.

In July, we had our annual tricky issue to contend with and one that is still haunting us, namely the Tiverton Information Centre, much loved, and in a prominent position in Phoenix Lane. Bids were to be invited, to tender to run the operation and deep down we felt that if the current operators could be successful and show that they could make the business viable, everyone would be happy. Hon.Ald. Susan Meads asked many pertinent questions and there was much anti-publicity regarding the preferred bid; that TIC should be run from the museum where it once was and some other business would rent the old premises giving much needed revenue to MDDC. This has yet to happen.

July also saw routine work, recommendations to Cabinet, the revised ASB policy, the revised Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults policy & action plan, and that approval be sought for the terms of reference of Tiverton Town Centre C.C.T.V management group with the proviso of there being one elected member from CWPDG . A health update from portfolio holder, Bob Deed plunged us into gloom with bed-blocking at RD & E ; the on-going inefficiencies in the NHS; demoralisation of ambulance staff and so on. Plus ça change !

The September meeting while it contained no recommendations, was very informative, Unite's Mr Lloyd and Debbie Westlake from Age UK were invited to give an update on their joint project to establish hubs to combat rural isolation. Both organisations receive seed funding for this initiative and it seemed only right, that we should learn how they were faring. The project is not an easy one but they felt that Crediton area was in greatest need. If only everywhere had an organisation such as the Blackdown Support Group which is so successful at helping those in the area and receives enormous support both financially and in volunteers. Lack of volunteers is a perennial problem even greater than finance for charities. I attended a conference on rural isolation at Cullompton and learnt so much about the work of the voluntary bodies, and again the need for volunteers was highlighted frequently & the difficulty communicating the services they could provide to those in need was over come, much misery could be alleviated. We shall endeavour to ask more grant recipients to speak to us on how their projects are progressing.

As the year progressed we noted various regular reports e.g. financial updates, performance and risk and how the welfare reforms were impacting on our staff and residents. (increase in enquiries but not the alarming debt situation as predicted). The customer care charter highlighted the changes in communications that this fast moving internet age is bringing to us all and will hopefully cut operating costs.

The special meeting in November to endorse grant funding to external bodies went smoothly now that the programme of annual cuts has bedded down and everyone knows what to expect. We managed to maintain funding levels for those bodies such as Age UK and CAB and others who resonate with our corporate plan . It was further recommended that members are informed of seed funding applications in their wards and what the outcome is.

We were informed that the “Targeted Family Support Program” is having organisational difficulties. (No surprise there, as when I attended a meeting of all the agencies involved with this work, it was the first time they had communicated outside their silos). The scheme has now been rolled out to include Cullompton and Crediton. It’s success will depend on much co-operation and social services in particular. They face many problems, not least staff retention at DCC, and overloaded casebooks, so once again a promising plan may fail for lack of funds. Lets hope not.

January saw us recommend a modest increase in leisure fees that should not hurt anyone. We responded to a consultation on the future of Childrens’ Homes, more in hope that notice might be taken of our concerns than actually expecting to have any influence over the decision that DCC would ultimately make. Thus it was, and at the time of writing I believe they will all have closed, and fostering will be the order of the day. One is left wondering where all these suitable foster carers are coming from?

Digital transformation has been discussed and marvelled at (great when it works), and we were treated to an, amusing as ever, Environmental Health update by Officer Paul Williams. We were advised not to touch the Exe room door handle if the swab was anything to go by!

March will see us considering a presentation on Neighbourhood Health Watch by the Project Leader. Will this cover obesity I wonder? Will we be recommending ways to protect vulnerable residents not entitled to statutory care, e.g. promoting Health Watch? NHS personal data has worried some members; both the manner by which the public were informed (by a flyer sent to every household amongst the junk mail) and the fact that it relied on inertia. It rested with the individual to inform his doctor if he did not want his medical details shared. Our secretary after much hard work has managed to pin someone down from the NHS to come and talk to us about the sharing of data.

There will be more financial monitoring, and our feedback on the Adult Social Services Review to be given. One feels however that it will have little influence in the long run.

This can only be a snapshot of the many issues this committee covers during the year and it only remains for me to thank all the members for their contributions, the officers for all their hard work, and last but not least, our admirable secretary, Sarah Lees, who always makes sense of our well meaning rambles.

Annual Report.

My first year as Chairman of the Mid Devon District Council Scrutiny Committee has been challenging with a very steep learning curve. I did make a number of mistakes whilst trying to strengthen the scrutiny process in Mid Devon! There is a considerable amount of work to be done before the committee can truly claim to be effective in scrutinising the work of MDDC.

One of the major changes is that we now have written reports on the agenda for all items thus enabling Councillors to consider issues before they get to the meeting. The only exception to this is if there is an emergency.

The Leader and all the Cabinet members have attended Scrutiny meetings giving members of the committee the opportunity to raise issues of importance and ask questions on the individual portfolios. There have been times when that questioning has not been as robust as it could have been. Having recognised that fact we have agreed to arrange training in questioning techniques in order to improve our performance.

Issues considered/scrutinised during the year included

Safeguarding

Conservation areas/ Article 4

Health and social care, including Clinical commissioning and Transforming Community Services.

Financial and risk monitoring.

Working groups and Task and finish Groups were set up and considered the following areas.

Ageing Well Working Group

Legal Services Working Group.

Communications. Thanks to the Leader and Cabinet for their support in establishing this group, thanks also to non-members of the committee who volunteered to work on this project.

Detailed reports were compiled and submitted to the Committee. We are also following up on each report to ensure that our recommendations are given due consideration.

A task and finish working group is still investigating ways of improving performance management within the Council.

Cllr Mrs Griggs and I attended a one day course at Birmingham University specifically aimed at Chairman and Vice Chairman, we both found the day of great help in giving us a greater understanding of how to improve the scrutiny function.

A very big thank you to Mrs Sarah Lees who is the members' services officer who ensures that all the work of the committee proceeds on time. Mrs Lees has a difficult job in that she is to all intents and purposes a Scrutiny Officer but does not have the status or protection of that role. Without her hard work, the work of the task and finish groups would have stalled. Thank you also to all the Members of the Council for allowing me to chair this committee and to the Members of the Committee for their support and encouragement.....most of the time! Jenny Roach 26/3/14