

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 as the difficulty communicating the services they could provide to those in need was overcome, 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.