MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **COMMUNITY WELL BEING POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 3 November 2015 at 2.00 pm

Present Councillors	Mrs B M Hull (Chairman) Mrs A R Berry, Mrs J B Binks, R M Deed, B A Moore, Mrs E J Slade and N A Way (substituting for Cllr F W Letch)
Apologies Councillor(s)	Mrs E M Andrews, F W Letch and Miss C E L Slade
Also Present Councillor(s)	Mrs H Bainbridge, R F Radford, F J Rosamond and C R Slade
Also Present Officer(s):	Amy Tregellas (Head of Communities and Governance and Monitoring Officer), Julia Stuckey (Member Services Officer) and Andrew Cawdron (Finance Manager)

36 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillor Mrs E M Andrews, Councillor Miss C L Slade and from Councillor F W Letch, who was substituted by Councillor N A Way.

37 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Referring to item 5 on the agenda Mr A Pilgrim informed the Group that he took exception to the funding for the canal being considered as payment to an external agency and that the canal was imbedded in the psyche of our communities, beneficial to Mid Devon District Council and geographically very important to Mid Devon. Mid Devon District Council proposed completely removing funding over the next couple of years, this was unhelpful, the canal was an economical and far reaching facility, with all people able to dip into a free at point of use facility. The total budget for the canal compared to the cost of leisure services was economical and leisure centres did not have such a broad catchment area. Mr Pilgrim stated that he was opposed to the cut, that the County Council could not top it up and the impact assessment suggested that in a very few years the canal would decline in its ability to provide a service. He said that it would be a disservice to the community if cuts were made, to mental and health benefits. Many people took solace from using the canal; it was one of the best in the country and provided wide ranging benefits.

Mr R Gould, referring to item 5 on the agenda stated that he was opposed overall to the proposals to cut grants, he stated that this was meant to be a Community Well Being Policy Group but it was not a development to cut grants, nor was it good for wellbeing. He pointed out the impact assessment matrix within the report. He

informed the Group that the payment in respect of the canal was never a grant, it went back to 1971 when Tiverton Borough was a partnership with Devon County Council, and Mid Devon had gradually reduced support over time. He stated that all of the agencies being cut were necessary and that the intended reduction of grants next year almost depleted the whole purpose of the committee.

Mr M Lucas, referring to item 5 on the agenda stated that he had lived in the area for 33 years and had been involved with the canal for 28 years. This was a tourist attraction which brought in many, many tourists. He said that he met people along the canal that had travelled from all over the country. The cuts proposed meant it was time to turn round and say enough is enough to central government. He urged that the council not cut this grant, destroying something that has been worked hard on for 25 years by everyone. The facilities were enjoyed by one and all and something to behold. He asked that the Group please look at the amount being taken away, people love the canal, we should love the canal, it is a hard task to make but the canal brings people into this area and helps prosperity in this part of the world.

Referring to item 5 on the agenda, Mr M Baker reminded the Group that last year he had been invited to give a presentation about the canal and that he had given some background to the funding arrangements and some of the pressures being faced. He believed that there had been some changes to membership of this group, so recapped a few of the key points made. The Annual revenue budget for the canal for this year was £174k. Devon County Council provided £71k of that, Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) provided £45k and the canal generated £58k through various sources of income (such as car parking, leases, log sales, and the like).

One of the slides showed that overheads were increasing year on year (utilities, fuel, insurance, waste disposal were all going up). When coupled with the funding cuts totalling £10k imposed by MDDC in recent years, there was now a situation where available budget for maintaining the canal was extremely tight – around one third of what it was 5 years ago. Nowadays it really just paid for the 3 staff members and the resources they needed to do the basic maintenance work along the canal, plus the upkeep of visitor facilities in the Canal Basin and some specialist contractors for doing the few jobs that they couldn't (such as specialist tree surgery work). All improvement works were now reliant on finding external funding.

Any cuts to the remaining revenue budget would impact directly on the Canal Ranger Service and the ability to maintain the 11 ¼ miles of the canal to a good standard and obviously the depth of the cut would determine the extent of the impact.

Given the financial pressures that all levels of local government were facing they had anticipated some further cuts to funding either from Mid Devon or Devon County and so had made plans for further increasing income to try and cover any shortfall over the coming years.

However, not only was the rate of increase in income that we can generate fairly limited but there had been absolutely no indication of the massive scale of funding withdrawal being proposed by Mid Devon in such a short timescale – 50% cut next year and nothing thereafter.

There was simply no scope for such cuts to be made up by increasing the income that we generate. There is also probably very little chance of Devon County Council stepping in and increasing its budget for the canal.

The only possible responses that I can see given the scale of cuts being proposed are to close down and cut back on some of the visitor facilities and to reduce staffing levels.

This would see a switch in emphasis away from managing the Canal as a destination for tourism and day trips, to simply one of managing the health and safety of visitors and trying to keep the canal free of weed in the highest priority areas. Undoubtedly there would be a severe impact on the businesses that are based along the canal, as well as an impact in the wider local economy.

Reducing staffing would also have the effect of reducing capacity to manage volunteers who play a crucial role in helping manage the canal. Also capacity to generate and collect the income which makes up such a significant proportion of our budget – would be badly damaged.

It seems that the canal is currently at something of a crossroads. If funding was severely cut, we really could see a reversal of all the good work and investment achieved in recent years. A downward spiral of declining funding, declining standards and declining income could take hold, and the impacts of this would be felt almost entirely by Mid Devon residents and Mid Devon businesses.

I'd like to ask the group if they could consider recommending that Mid Devon District Council and Devon County Council meet to discuss the joint funding arrangements for the canal and find a way to manage the situation in partnership, as they have done for the last 40 years.

Mr Hodgson, referring to item 5 on the agenda stated that he firmly believed that nothing in report should be cut, in particular the canal. He stated that he was speaking on behalf of 300,000 visitors that came each year to enjoy the canal – he said that death by a 1000 cuts would follow soon.

Councillor Mrs H Bainbridge, referring to item 5 on the agenda said that everyone was now fully aware of the implications that these cuts would have on the canal. She stated that the canal was a major asset to Mid Devon and even more important now that the authority was charged with public health and walking was popular and easy on the canal. If the ranger service was cut the facilities would deteriorate. She informed the Group that even when the Council was in special measures money was still found to save the Walronds. She asked if there was any other funding pot within Mid Devon which could go to the canal. She said that there had been a pledge to give £100k towards the repairs to the breach and asked if this funding was still available.

Mrs R Stephenson, referring to item 5 on the agenda stated that she was opposed to the cut of £1k, the total grant, to the Crediton Arts Centre. She asked what Crediton would be like without an Arts Centre and said that proportionally £1K was a lot to a small organisation which was already operating on a knife edge. She informed the Group that the Arts Centre was a major contributor to cultural and economic life in Crediton and had been involved with the food festival, Shakespeare in the Square,

Youth Theatre, the Flag Project and Christmas events. She also said that losing the grant from Mid Devon sent a message to other supporters and made it more difficult to get funding from elsewhere.

Ms N Rowe from the Citizens Advice Bureau asked if the Group were aware that the Citizens Advice Bureau had supported 2592 clients within Mid Devon in the last year and had dealt with 6300 issues. They had helped clients to claim a considerable amount of money that they were due, which meant income into the community. She asked how the Council planned to replace this money.

Mr D Margets, referring to item 5 on the agenda, asked the Group to be aware of paragraph 2.1 within the report which stated that this council sought to protect allocations to agencies providing a reliable service to the districts most vulnerable residents. He asked whether the Group considered that the Citizens Advice Bureau did that.

The Chairman indicated that the answers to the questions raised would be provided at agenda item 5.

38 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the last meeting of the Group were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

39 CHAIRMANS ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman, referring to comments made by Mr Gould in public question time, explained to those in attendance that the Group looked at more than just grants and had a full agenda of other items throughout the year.

The Chairman informed those in attendance that any recommendation made today would go forward to the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 19th November 2015.

40 GRANT PAYMENTS TO EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS 2016/17

The Group had before it a report * from the Grants and Funding Officer seeking Member approval for the level of grant awards to external organisations for 2016/17.

The Head of Communities and Governance outlined the contents of the report, explaining that the authority had paid grants for a number of years and that in 2011 there had been 25 organisations that received grants totalling £250K. In 2012/13 a fundamental review of the grants process was undertaken and this prioritised the recipients into three groups, high priority, medium priority and low priority. Those of low priority received a tapered reduction in their grants to the end of 2014/15. At this time Members also agreed to allocate £32K to a seed fund so that organisations could put in bids for projects. Since then the Authority had worked with organisations to help them become more self-sufficient. The Grants and Funding Officer had brought in a considerable level of funding to the District over the last few years.

Last year a reduction of £20k was made to the grant budget and remaining funds in the Seed Fund were allocated.

In accordance with the process previously agreed by the Group organisations were asked to submit annual accounts, which formed appendix 4 of the report, along with an impact assessment. Each organisation had been/were being given the opportunity to come along to a meeting of the Group to explain what they did and how the grant was spent.

The Officer went on to remind the Group that it was a reality that cuts had to be made and that it was not possible to fund community grants at the same level as in the past. A balanced budget had to be set by the authority and grants were discretionary and not a statutory service.

Referring to appendix 1 of the report the Officer worked through the list of recommended grant allocations for 2016/17, highlighting the following areas:

- Records submitted indicated that the Blackdown Support Group showed a profit and healthy reserve;

- The Citizens Advice Bureau had dealt with a lower number of queries in the last year than in previous years and the council itself was providing advice from Moneywise;

- Detailed financial information provided by the Crediton Arts Centre showed a healthy turnover, a profit of £40k and a healthy reserve;

- Sunnymead Community Association generated a substantial income and had healthy reserves;

- Grants payable to the Tiverton Museum and Tourist Information Service had been set for a three year period and were now in their final year of protection.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The overall budget for both discretionary and statutory services;

- The need to look at income and reserves within financial information provided by the organisations;

- The percentage of cuts to some organisations being higher than others;

- The need to maintain a presence in Crediton;

- The need to make savings in order to set a balanced budget;

- £100k that had been pledged towards the repair of the canal breach;

- The need for robust impact assessments;

- The previous ‘unofficial’ partnership with Devon County Council regarding the canal;

- The possibility of future partnership working regarding the canal.

It was **RESOLVED** that

1) A meeting based on a partnership approach be set up between Mid Devon District Council and Devon County Council, to discuss the ways in which a settlement could be agreed that kept the canal viable, and that the whereabouts of the £100k that was pledged to the breach be investigated.

   (Proposed by Cllr N A Way and seconded by Cllr Mrs J D Binks)

2) A working group be put in place to review the grants report, in particular appendix 5 and that the group membership comprise of Cllrs Mrs E J Slade, N A Way, Mrs B M Hull, Mrs R Berry and that Cllr R Radford be co-opted to the group as a County Councillor.

   (Proposed by Cllr Mrs J B Binks and seconded by Councillor Mrs R Berry)

Note:- i) Report * previously circulated and attached to Minutes.

ii) Councillors R F Radford and N A Way declared a personal interest as Devon County Councillors.

iii) Councillor Mrs J D Binks declared a personal interest as she was on the Panel of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

iv) Councillor Mrs E J Slade declared a personal interest as she was a committee member at the Tiverton Museum.

vi) Councillor C R Slade declared a personal interest as a member of the Grand Western Canal Joint Advisory Committee.

41 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Anti-Social Behaviour Stats
Performance and Risk
Financial Monitoring
Grant Recipient Presentation
Update from the Grant Working Group

(The meeting ended at 3.45 pm) **CHAIRMAN**