

REPORT OF: Stephen Walford, Chief Executive

Member Development – Strategic Thinking Update

Responsible Officer: Sally Gabriel, Member Services Manager

Reason for Report: Earlier this year, following assessment and interviews, the council secured the charter for member development for a further three years (to April 2020). As part of ongoing member development activity, 11 members recently participated in a development session focused on 'strategic thinking'. This report updates scrutiny on that activity and highlights emerging concepts for consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the committee note the report as presented, and considers whether any recommendations may arise from its content.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Good governance and decision-making underpin all aspects of the corporate plan.

Financial Implications: None arising from this report.

Legal Implications: None arising from this report.

Risk Assessment: The quality of member thought, debate and direction, is vitally important to the sound decision-making of the council. A strong commitment to self-development maximises the potential for robust, positive decisions and minimises corporate risk. This is true as much for elected members as it is for employed staff.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 In March this year, the council was successful in retaining its member development charter following an assessment process led by South West Councils and being part of a national programme supported by the Local Government Association¹.
- 1.2 This member development assessment came shortly after the council's peer challenge review, which outlined the need to make the most of members' talents within the PDG and Scrutiny functions... *'Changing this to be more productive will need a change in outlook and practice from members [and officers] but would offer the council a potentially valuable resource.'* This is set out in the Peer Challenge Feedback Report (see background papers).
- 1.3 As part of an overarching member development programme, a session was arranged to look at strategic thinking and effective discussion. This report provides an update from that session.

¹ <https://www.middevon.gov.uk/your-council/councillors-democracy/councillors/member-development/>

2.0 Update

- 2.1 On 6th October a half-day session, externally-facilitated, was held with members. The 11 attending (over 25% of the elected members of the council) were self-selecting and came from across the majority administration group and those in other parties / independents.
- 2.2 The session was split into a number of elements, with regular workshop breakouts where sentiment was captured on flip-charts or post-it notes. The content of these is reflected in appendix A, but could be grouped into the subject categories below – note that comments are from individuals and are non-attributable:
- What is a good/positive strategic discussion?
 - What is a bad/negative strategic discussion?
 - How do you know when conflict is being avoided?
 - What does a negative discussion feel like?
 - How do you know if trust is absent?
 - What would you change?
- 2.3 The list of items that members would like to change provides a useful illustration of some of the hopes, aspirations and frustrations of members in that setting. There was no deliverability context, so these suggestions range from easy to hard, and from small to large value in terms of council outcomes.
- 2.4 The majority (all?) members felt it was a valuable use of their time and that there were a range of positive sentiments that could be taken forward. Discussion at scrutiny provides a formal arena for this to happen.

3.0 Next Steps

- 3.1 Members to consider how to take this forward and to advise the council's member services function on future member development needs.

Contact for more Information:

Stephen Walford, Chief Executive: SWalford@MidDevon.gov.uk

Circulation of the Report: All Members

List of Background Papers:

Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report:

<https://www.middevon.gov.uk/your-council/how-the-council-works/corporate-peer-challenge/>

Appendix A

What is a good/positive strategic discussion?

<i>Debate & Diversity</i>	<i>Options</i>	<i>Clear Facts</i>	<i>Clarity</i>
<i>Direction</i>	<i>Concise</i>	<i>Safe Space</i>	<i>Decisive Chair</i>
<i>A bit of 'thinking time'</i>	<i>Effective Summary</i>	<i>Time to Digest/Reflect</i>	

What does this feel like?

<i>Mutual Respect</i>	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Empowerment</i>	<i>Valued</i>
<i>Informed</i>	<i>Commitment</i>	<i>Buy-in</i>	<i>Ok to Disagree</i>
<i>Constructive Conflict</i>	<i>Need a Sense of Achievement</i>		

What is a bad/negative strategic discussion?

<i>Woolly Language</i>	<i>1 Person Dominating</i>	<i>Talking Over Each Other</i>
<i>Playing with Phone</i>	<i>Pre-conceived Ideas/Outcome</i>	<i>No Output</i>
<i>Not Read Papers!</i>	<i>Disrespect for Differing Views</i>	<i>Not getting Involved</i>
<i>Sycophancy</i>	<i>Buzz words / 'Fashionable' language</i>	<i>Sleeping</i>
<i>Chairman controlling too much</i>	<i>People Not Listening</i>	

What does this feel like?

<i>Tribal</i>	<i>Tired</i>	<i>Frustrated</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Bullied</i>	<i>Bored</i>	<i>Annoyed</i>	<i>Impotent</i>
<i>Fed Up</i>	<i>Waste of Time</i>	<i>Why am I Here?</i>	<i>No Point</i>
<i>Personal Feelings Can Get in the Way</i>			

How do you know when conflict is being avoided?

<i>No eye contact</i>	<i>Changing the subject</i>	<i>Body language</i>	<i>Reading emails</i>
<i>Pre-determination</i>	<i>Side conversations</i>	<i>Feigning agreement</i>	<i>Silence</i>
<i>Not contributing</i>	<i>False platitudes</i>	<i>Failure to challenge</i>	<i>No debate</i>

What can you do about it?

<i>Prompt a response</i>	<i>Take a break</i>	<i>Encourage contribution</i>
<i>Recognise value of alternative views</i>		<i>Play devil's advocate</i>
<i>Create involvement</i>	<i>'What do you think?'</i>	
<i>Involve everyone</i>	<i>Know your colleagues</i>	

How do you know when trust is absent?

<i>Lack of preparation</i>	<i>Evasiveness</i>	<i>Disrespect</i>	<i>No straight answers</i>
<i>Personal hostility</i>	<i>Lack of eye contact</i>	<i>Prejudice</i>	<i>Superficiality</i>
<i>Avoiding meetings</i>	<i>Dominating opinions</i>	<i>Taking comfort in groups</i>	
<i>Saying one thing/doing another</i>	<i>Diversionsary tactics</i>		

What can you do about it?

<i>Ask for clarity</i>	<i>Challenge behaviour</i>	<i>Draw attention to it</i>	<i>Question</i>
<i>Rise above it</i>	<i>Offer opportunity</i>	<i>Get rid of Political Groups</i>	
<i>Vary seating arrangements</i>	<i>Get back on topic</i>	<i>Mix it up</i>	
<i>Look for opportunities to come together and build trust</i>			

What would you like to change? (Not in any particular order)

Chairman should be best for job (not according to political colour)
Get rid of political groups
Find a democratic way to shorten planning meetings
Standing to speak at council (some thought all should sit, others thought all – incl officers, should stand)
Members should be more concise when speaking
Members should not feel they have to speak to justify their attendance
Get rid of cabinet system
Sit where you like at meetings
Stop the prayers before full council – presumes religion
PDGs should make policy recommendations to full council, not cabinet
Change policy on sustainable villages
Independent facilitation for a member away day
Chairs of committees should change after 2 years maximum
Introduce 'pause for reflection/thought' instead of Christian prayers
Stop political parties forming groups
Right to buy receipts should stay with local council
Some committee chairs should go to opposition members (not just scrutiny)
Planning rules should not be subject to 'robust conditions'
DCC control over what we want to do
Allow councils to invest in social housing
Musical chairs at meetings – don't like being told where to sit