

## **MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **ENVIRONMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP**  
held on 7 November 2017 at 2.00 pm

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

R F Radford (Chairman)  
D R Coren, Mrs C P Daw, R Evans,  
D J Knowles, Mrs E J Slade, J D Squire,  
R Wright and Mrs J Roach

### **Apologies**

#### **Councillor(s)**

Mrs N Woollatt

### **Also Present**

#### **Councillor(s)**

C J Eginton

### **Also Present**

#### **Officer(s):**

Andrew Pritchard (Director of Operations), Stuart Noyce (Group Manager for Street Scene and Open Spaces), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Rob Fish (Principal Accountant) and Julia Stuckey (Member Services Officer)

## **31 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Apologies were received from Cllr N Woollatt who was substituted by Cllr Mrs J Roach.

## **32 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

Mr B Warren, representing Willand Parish Council, informed the Committee that he had been displeased by sarcastic comments made at the last meeting regarding the absence of councillors from Willand, which he did not consider to be in line with the Charter. The Chairman apologised for this.

Referring to item 6 on the agenda Mr Warren stated that paragraph 1.2.4 advises that communication and clear consultation must take place with all parties being updated. Experience to date has shown instances where action has been taken and consultation which has taken place has been to justify the action taken, not resolve the matter to the satisfaction of aggrieved parties. I raise this at this point as it may be that this part of the report is referred to as an answer to points raised in the following questions and I will not be allowed to respond. This is also raised to ensure that the true spirit of paragraph 7.2.4 is recognised.

Paragraph 7.0 deals with built environment and subsequent paragraphs are headed 7.2.1 Remove, 7.2.2 Reduce, 7.2.3 Repair. Why is there no policy recommendation to replace?

Paragraph 8.0 refers to play areas and 8.1 states that they are part of the built environment and would be approached within the context of paragraph 7. Is it

therefore the intention that if the one and only swing in a play area breaks beyond repair it will be removed as it is beyond repair and will not be replaced with another swing as there is no policy to replace? Is there to be no sinking fund to replace equipment? Is this a veiled attempt to introduce a managed decline policy of play areas by removing equipment as it becomes irreparable? If there is less equipment then the play area will not be used and then there will be the argument to close them down. Do Members appreciate that to approve recommendation 4 as set out in paragraph 8.5 could have that effect?

If approving recommendation 6 at paragraph 8.5.2 are members saying that they will have no problem with dogs being in the play area with small children?

Does the information in paragraph 8.3 include Willand? If it does it is incorrect. Willand has four areas the subject of lease with MDDC, three have 23 years to run and one has 25 years.

The Director of Operations responded, informing Members that he considered it appropriate to add the word 'replace' at section 7.2.3 as it had always been intended that having decided that the equipment was needed and could not be removed or reduced, that it would be replaced if it was beyond economic repair. Adding the word 'replace' would remove any ambiguity from that section.

The Director also informed Mr Warren that if the information provided regarding the length of leases at 8.3 was factually incorrect he would arrange for a correction to be made; however, this did not materially change the content of the paragraph.

### **33 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the last meeting were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

### **34 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

### **35 MOTION 538 (CLLR MRS J ROACH – 1 JUNE 2017)**

Following a request at its meeting in May the Committee had before it a report \* from the Director of Operations regarding to Motion 538.

Motion 538 (Cllr Mrs J Roach – 1 June 2017)

Mid Devon District Council is concerned that the present level of grass cutting across the district is the subject of much criticism.

The Mid Devon District Council therefore resolves to urgently review;

1. Whether the budget is sufficient and if it isn't to put forward a request to Council for a supplementary budget to meet the cost of providing an effective service.

2. If it is impossible to provide extra funding the Council should consider asset transfers to Parish Councils and/or individuals.

Taxpayers are now facing the second year of a grass cutting regime which leaves the grass uncut for long periods.

The Director of Operations outlined the contents of the report, which answered a number of questions that had been asked at the previous meeting.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Accounting procedures and the ledger that had been used to calculate figures within the report;
- Cost of living increases;
- An estimated undercharge to the Housing Revenue Account for services provided;
- Ongoing issues regarding areas of land within the parishes and whose responsibility they were with regard to grass cutting;
- The need for accurate data;
- The variety of methods for calculating cost per unit and how they could vary depending on the time required and equipment needed;
- The number of complaints received by Members regarding grass cutting had vastly increased in the last two years;
- Grass cutting was a discretionary service and the standard required was subject to personal perspective;
- The need to confirm the number of cuts undertaken when bills were being sent to towns and parishes;
- Town and Parish Councils could apply to lease any assets, for example play areas.

It was **RESOLVED** that a working group be put in place to further investigate grass cutting pricing methodology and charging recovery. The working group to consist of Cllrs Mrs C P Daw, R F Radford and D R Coren.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs J Roach and seconded by Cllr D J Knowles)

Cllr Mrs Roach was satisfied with the information provided within the report and discussion that had taken place and withdrew her Motion.

It was **RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that invoices to town and parish councils regarding grass cutting should confirm the number of cuts undertaken with dates.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs J Roach and seconded by Cllr R Evans)

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

## 36 **PARKS AND OPEN SPACES, 10 YEAR MANAGEMENT PLANS AND DESIGN PRINCIPLES**

The Group had before it a report \* from the Director of Operations regarding Parks and Open Spaces, 10 year Management Plans and Design Principles. This was the third time that the report had been put before the Group and it now contained amendments that they had requested along with suggestions from the Community Policy Development Group.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The addition of the word 'replace' to follow 'repair' at 7.2.3;
- The various options available to provide a barrier, other than fencing, to prevent young children being put at risk in play areas, that could provide a play item for older children, such as boulders or logs;
- The need to maintain certain parts of the old cemetery and the costs of doing so. It was **AGREED** that the Grass Cutting Working Group would look into this matter further.

It was **RECOMMENDED** to Cabinet that subject to the changes identified below the Parks and Open Spaces, 10 year Management Plans and Design Principles be approved:

- a) The Council should look to increase the volume of wild flower, natural grassland meadows and slow growing grasses in its open spaces.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs J Roach and seconded by Cllr B Wright)

- b) Where shrub beds have become overgrown, a new style of specimen planting will be used to replace traditional shrub bed areas.

(Proposed by Cllr R Evans and seconded by Cllr Mrs J Roach)

- c) The management of tree stock will be set in the context of the 10 year management plan for that open space. There should be a presumption on the use of native trees as the prominent choice within any landscape design.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

- d) *Subject to the addition of the word 'replace' at 7.2.3:* When considering maintenance of the built environment the Remove – Reduce – Repair approach outlined in paragraphs 7.2.1 to 7.2.4 above should be applied.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs J Roach and seconded by Cllr D R Coren)

- e) Play England – Making Space for Play should be adopted by Mid Devon District Council as its formal reference for best practice in the design and management of play areas.

(Proposed by Cllr R Evans and seconded by Cllr R Wright)

- f) *Subject to the addition of the wording ‘or a suitable barrier provided’ after the word ‘fence’* Play areas must be fenced where fencing is the most appropriate means to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of children. E.g. to physically separate play areas from roads and/or cycle paths.

(Proposed by Cllr R Evans and seconded by Cllr Mrs J Roach)

- g) When work is undertaken to remove fences or other items, such as benches, the work must be undertaken in a safe manner ensuring no residual hazards.

(Proposed by Cllr D J Knowles and seconded by Cllr Mrs E Slade)

- h) Headstone runners should be used to define and structure new burial plots.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs J Roach and seconded by Cllr D J Knowles)

- i) *Subject to the removal of the sentence: ‘Environmental areas should be generated in the old sections of the Council’s cemeteries and biodiversity actively promoted in naturalised habitats.’* At all times War Graves shall be tended and maintained with clear access routes made available.

(Proposed by Cllr R Evans and seconded by Cllr Mrs J Roach)

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

### 37 DRAFT BUDGET

The Group had before it and **NOTED** a report \* from the Director of Finance, Assets and Resources to consider options available in order for the Council to set a balanced budget for 2018/19 and agree a future strategy for further budget reductions for 2019/20 onwards.

The Principal Accountant informed Members that the report had been to the Cabinet on 26<sup>th</sup> October. He explained it was a position statement, at the early stage of budget setting and that the budget was an evolving process.

The officer outlined the contents of the report stating that the initial aggregation of all service budgets (which included assumptions surrounding predictions for interest receipts, contribution to the capital programme, transfers to/from reserves and council tax levels) currently indicated a General Fund budget gap of £617k. The following table showed the main budget variances affecting the 2018/19 draft budget:

<b>Variations</b>	<b>Amount £k</b>
<b>External items outside of our control</b>	
Reduced formula grant settlement	318
Decrease in Housing Benefit Grant and increase in associated costs	57
Pay Award and pension increases	239
Rural Services Delivery grant	86
Transition Grant	32
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>732</b>

<i>Other changes</i>	
Increase in service cost pressures	317
Not utilising New Homes Bonus to balance the budget	89
Increase in property sinking funds	100
Interest payments on loans for new leisure equipment	45
Service cost reductions	(108)
New or increased income identified by service managers	(272)
Increase in Council Tax income (£5 rise + 370 new properties)	(212)
Net recharge to HRA	(108)
Minor changes	34
<b>Draft budget gap for 2018/19</b>	<b>617</b>

Consideration was given to

- The Business Rate Retention Scheme;
- The Scrutiny Committee had recommended that Council reinstate an ‘away day’ at which all Members could contribute to budget discussions;
- The need for difficult decisions to be made in the coming years.

It was **RESOLVED** that a Working Group be put in place to look in greater detail at the budget areas that fell within the remit of the Group. Working Group members would be Cllrs R Evans, Mrs E J Slade, R F Radford and D R Coren).

(Proposed by Cllr R Evans and seconded by Cllr Mrs C Daw)

### 38 **FINANCIAL MONITORING**

The Group had before it and **NOTED** a report from the Director of Finance, Assets and Resources presenting financial monitoring information for the income and expenditure for the financial year 2017/18.

The Principal Accountant outlined the contents of the report stating that the General Fund deficit for the current year was £181K. There were no areas of concern to report within the remit of the Group.

Note: - Report previously circulated and attached to Minutes.

### 39 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK**

The Group had before it and **NOTED** a report \* from the Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation providing Members with an update on performance against the corporate plan and local service targets for 2017-18 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security outlined the contents of the report explaining that areas within the remit of the Group were mostly at or above target.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Garden waste permits were above target;
- Smaller vehicles for waste collection had been purchased which would be beneficial to air quality;
- The number of customers using the garden waste bag scheme.

Members wished that their thanks to the Group Manager for Street Scene and Open Spaces and his team be recorded for their excellent performance.

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

#### 40 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Budget  
Performance and Risk  
Update from Working Groups  
District Officer Discretionary Time  
Waste Update

(The meeting ended at 4.03 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**