

Scrutiny Committee Chairman's report 2018-2019

A recent report by the then Communities and Local Government Select Committee queried whether Councils were taking Overview and Scrutiny seriously enough, especially those with large political majorities, with a culture of resisting challenge. Effective Scrutiny is essential in maintaining vigilance in an Executive/Cabinet structure and achieving balance between Members and the Cabinet.

I am pleased to report that MDDC takes the role of Scrutiny seriously and strongly supports its contribution to the successful management of the Council and service provision for the community, aided by the valued services of the Scrutiny Officer. Members of Cabinet regularly attend Committee meetings to face interrogation of their portfolio responsibilities whilst Officers are unfailing in providing detailed reports and advice in response to Member concerns. Key to successful Scrutiny is the interrogation skills and enthusiasm that Members bring to Committee business, qualities that were epitomised by the late Cllr Jenny Roach who sadly passed away this year.

It has been a busy year.

1. External challenge

The Committee invited Neil Parish MP in August 2018 to answer questions on a broad range of topics including the implications of Brexit on agriculture, 5 year land supply, A-level provision in Mid Devon, Government's National Planning Practice Guidance, Right-to-Buy and Universal Credit. The Chairman extends his thanks to our Member of Parliament for providing comprehensive responses and pro-actively engaging with Ministers and senior government officers on our behalf.

2. Working Groups

It is the role of Scrutiny to monitor the quality of services and to hear from residents about issues of concern to them. This year Scrutiny established working groups to look at some of these concerns and review Council's own performance and direction in the following areas.



Anaerobic
Digestion



Partnerships



Community
Engagement



Homelessness

2.1 Anaerobic Digestion

To understand the science behind Anaerobic Digestion (AD), national government policy and the impact of the industry in Mid Devon. The report was initiated as a result of concerns raised by some residents living in close proximity to AD plants and affected by related activities such as slurry pits and digestate spreading on land. AD plants were visited and the industry perspective sought.

Recommendations from the Working group included that a formal request is made to the Environment Agency that Mid Devon District Council (Planning and Public Health) are consultees on environmental permitting and that where enforcement issues are raised with an AD plant or associated activities (for example through complaints and service requests or routine inspections), coordination takes place between relevant agencies and Mid Devon District Council.

Council will also pro-actively liaise with all stakeholders (residents, operators, and agencies) to ensure local issues are dealt with as fairly and openly as legally permissible.

2.2 Partnerships

In the light of continued pressure on budgets it is likely that Councils will look to shared services in the future. It was therefore important that Council look at partnership models to see how they could apply. Business plans for all Council services were provided to the working group and noted in the report.

2.3 Community Engagement

The Council has a duty to consult and engage effectively with residents, partners, employees and other stakeholders when deciding about future changes to services and new developments. The report looked at current ways of working when a customer first makes contact and made suggestions for improvements.

As part of the process a survey was sent to all Town and Parish Councils as a way of getting feedback on how well the Council communicated with them.

The working group were informed of initiatives that were to be embedded in the new Community Engagement Strategy and provided suggestions. The working group asked that an update on the proposed new Customer Relationship Management system is provided to Scrutiny in due course.

2.4 Homelessness

Looking at existing service provision and whether the service provided meets the needs of the homeless. Presentations from key officers provided a comprehensive understanding of how the Housing service deals with homelessness. New legislation was explored and how this had changed the way Council approaches homelessness.

It was recommended that a series of workshops would be set up to consult on the Council's new homelessness strategy.

3. Topics explored

The Committee investigated a number of topics and issues raised by both Members and residents as follows:

- Potholes and road maintenance – information and correspondence was received from Devon County Council highways officers as this issue was raised by residents on numerous occasions.
- Air quality – the Group Manager for Public Health and Regulatory Services updated the committee on the progress of the Air Quality action plan.
- District Nurse retention – concerns were raised regarding the falling numbers of district nurses particularly in light of efforts to keep people at home for longer. A parliamentary paper and local NHS statistics were provided on the topic.
- A-level provision – lobbying for provision to be provided in Tiverton is ongoing. Residents had raised this issue with Members of the Committee. Currently students have to attend either Exeter or Taunton.
- Broadband – both residents and Members have raised this issue. The Connecting Devon and Somerset project is within the remit of the Devon County Council who have been asked to report on progress in Mid Devon at a forthcoming meeting.
- Cyber security – Members requested an internal report on the range of cyber-attacks and our readiness to mitigate these.
- Brexit – Scrutiny has been kept updated with the latest thinking from the LGA and senior officer updates on the Council's preparedness whatever the final outcome.

4. Regular Member and Officer Reports

The Committee receives regular reports on risk, performance and delivery of a range of services within the Council's remit. This year's highlights included:

- Report from the Group Manager for Corporate Property and Commercial Assets providing information on historic district-wide Local Improvement Schemes and their associated liability
- Briefing paper of the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) providing an update on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme
- Report from Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration presenting information on affordable housing contributions secured through the planning system via S106 agreements together with information on the approach to providing affordable housing on site or via off site financial contributions
- Complaints and Feedback Policy - It was recommended to the Cabinet that the revised Complaints and Feedback Policy be approved.
- Report from the Group Manager for Human Resources on the level of resignations and the reasons for them

- Report from the Area Planning Officer on the Tiverton Town Masterplan following public consultation
- Report on the review of performance indicators given to Elected Members from the Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security which was requested by a member of the public
- Briefing from the Group Manager for Finance in relation to Mid Devon being a trial area for the retention of Business Rates
- Report from the Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation of the Safeguarding Policy & Procedures
- Report from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) on Universal Credit
- Report from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) on Business Rates rebates
- Draft Budget 2019/2020

5. Call-ins

The decision of the Cabinet made on Thursday 10th May 2018 with regard to the sale of the Crediton Office was called in by the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee.

6. Three Rivers – Special Property Vehicle

This new development is wholly owned by the Council but not run by the Council. Nevertheless, like all MDDC activity it should fall within the aegis of Scrutiny and consequently be periodically subject to the vigilance of the Committee.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all Members for their contribution and support over the past year, aided by the unstinting commitment of Members Services, especially the Member Services officer Carole Oliphant, and end my final year by extending good wishes to the successor Committee for the challenging times ahead.

Cllr Frank Rosamond
Chair of Scrutiny