

Cabinet Member for Support Services and the Working Environment Annual Report to Scrutiny January 2020

Human Resources

Establishment Management and Workforce Planning

We have continued to make good progress around reporting key aspects of Establishment Performance and how these relate to both workforce planning and budget performance. For example we have been able to illustrate how the relationship between falling sickness absence (down from 8.24 days in 18/19 to be at between an estimated 6.5 and 6.75 days per FTE employee in 20/21) relates to a better grip on agency spend and expenditure (down from £628, 636.06 in 18/19 to a predicted £560, 000 spend in 20/21. This would be a lot lower had it not been for COVID-19 and the immediate demand this has meant for agency staff from time to time). Turnover is still fairly high in being predicted to come in at between 16 and 18% but this is covered in the next section.

Pre-empting and troubleshooting risk

The Council has had some considerable challenges with staff conduct issues this year and employees in some areas of the Council not understanding the implications of their own actions and how these can both compromise their own employment contract as well as the activity of the Council. This had led to some employees facing disciplinary action up to and including dismissal, which in turn has impacted upon our turnover rate.

In response to these issues the Council has published a new Conduct policy agreed with the Union which has raised awareness of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour as well as the importance of the Nolan principles which underpin the high standard of conduct expected from all local government employees.

Employee Engagement and Wellbeing

The all staff consultative group 'Impact' has gone from strength to strength, heavily shaping the organisations work around COVID-19 and both the site plans and wider workforce support that has been provided to employees. They have also been heavily involved with the design and implementation of the Evolve project which looks to strengthen staff development and engagement (see following learning and development section).

The Council has promoted a range of initiatives and practice around mental health and wellbeing in the workplace through our Health and Safety officer Chris Hodgson. This has included raising awareness of our in house employee assistance programme which offers telephone counselling services and wider support to employees. We are also planning to use

an employee wellbeing index to assess the mental health provision and support on offer to our workforce during the 21/22 financial year.

Payroll

A 2.75% pay rise was implemented, meaning our lowest pay rate is now £9.25 per hour.

As a result of Covid-19, we have devised a system for the reporting of employees that have been furloughed, and a process for calculating the amounts that we have claimed from HMRC. We have also used the data that we have received to provide daily and weekly workforce reports regarding the deployment of our employees (see below section on COVID-19).

Learning and Development

The Evolve project (a series of initiatives around supporting our workforce and allowing training needs and skill development to be co-ordinated effectively) has made formally launched with promotional videos and literature allowing staff to access the different measures that we are introducing.

This has focused initially on the roll out of online Appraisal and PDR, the use of a new competency framework and the carrying out of a skills analysis exercise to show where the strengths and development areas of the workforce are. This will then further inform future leadership development and talent management programmes.

The Corporate Training Catalogue using training provider CRISP was delivered virtually throughout 2020 with a focus on employee wellbeing. The Conflict Training Company were used to deliver sessions to 60 Building Maintenance and Housing Staff.

The options of free training resources including Open Learn, E Learning College, Learn Devon together with the free Mentoring programme delivered by South Devon College and the Developing Business Flexibility programme delivered by Petroc were taken up by employees.

The Levy has continued to be used fully, (no expired funds returning to the government) with 6 Apprenticeship sign ups and 7 on plan to complete their programmes this financial year.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a range of extra activity being undertaken to ensure vital services are still delivered to our community and HR has been at the centre of helping and advising the organisation on how its resources are deployed.

This has included collecting and distributing daily and weekly workforce data to show how our employees were being deployed including WFH, working at site and Furlough (as well as

levels of sickness and annual leave). The Payroll team have processed monthly furlough requests to ensure that we have been reimbursed by the government where decisions have been taken to furlough staff.

We have also ensured that cases where staff have had to self-isolate have been tracked and we have also set up a testing application service so the Council can refer its own employees to be tested expediently. To date we have had no positive COVID-19 test results in our workforce during the pandemic.

Finally we have worked hand in hand with our Property Services team to ensure that our sites and office space is both safe, legally compliant but also COVID-19 friendly. Wider actions have included carrying out staff surveys to collate feedback around WFH and ensuring communication and wellbeing advice has been well distributed and advertised including our online employee assistance programme.

Health & Safety

This report covers the period from 4 May to 8 December 2020.

During this period the focus has been on COVID and the associated risk assessments to ensure Mid Devon District Council is operating COVID secure across its services.

Accidents/Incidents

There have been 24 employee accidents for the reporting period, two of which have been under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations, 2013 (RIDDOR). There have been 8 accidents involving members of the public, one of which was reported under RIDDOR. There have been 22 incidents of verbal abuse or threatening behaviour towards council officers.

One incident of note, an activation of the fire alarm in the waste transfer station at Carlu close - following an investigation this was identified as a false alarm, no fire. However, it highlighted a potential issue with the fire detectors, instigating a manufacturer's review of those detectors. All detectors were found to be free of defects.

Potential Items of Interest

- The following policies have been reviewed during this period: Temporary home working policy _ COVID- implemented (Display Screen Equipment(DSE) assessments of the majority of temporary home workers completed); Home working Policy, out for review; First Aid Policy, implemented; Corporate Health and Safety Policy, out for review.
- Regular visits to all front line services (Street scene, Carlu Close; Building services, Old Road; Leisure Services, Exe Valley, Culm Valley, Lords Meadow; Phoenix House; and the Pannier Market. This is with an acknowledgement that, with an ongoing Pandemic, 'normal' health and safety audits of service areas is not appropriate.
- Fire and water risk assessments are being undertaken by outside contractors, all assessments will be completed by 17 December.

- An agreed approach for the provision of First Aid Training and the training of Accident Investigation and manual handling has been agreed with learning and development.
- The health and safety officer has undertaken training in Emergency Planning, in order to be able to support the Corporate Management Team.

Covid

Covid is the ongoing priority with respect to safety, as of the 2nd of December Devon moved to tier 2. Interestingly the restrictions under this higher tier are greater than under the pre lockdown tier 2 and a consistent emphasis across all 3 tiers is everyone who can work from home should do so. The change of tier has triggered a further review of COVID risk assessments across the Council, the reviews are ongoing.

November coincided with a second national lock down, with a renewed emphasis on working from home. In light of this we have endeavoured to put something in the Link each week on wellbeing. Acknowledging the fact that a significant majority of our colleagues cannot work from home and are still working delivering essential services, posters around the theme of wellbeing are being put together and posted at sites, Carlu Close, Old Road and Leisure.

Electoral Services

Electoral Registration 2020-21

- Met 100% of Electoral Commission Performance Standards for Electoral Registration
- Ran annual canvass of electors under Covid conditions (no door to door visits) and under new regulations, whereby a data match with the Department of Work and Pensions was run prior to the canvass. Any properties where all electors matched were sent a form which they only needed to respond to where there were changes to be made.
- The team worked from home as far as they were able to, but needed to work in the office for scanning and printing.
- Will end the year on budget.

Elections 2020-21

- Cancelled the 2020 Police and Crime Commissioner polls.
- Planning for May 2021 elections, including all the postponed polls from 2020, which will be run under Covid safe conditions. These include:
 1. Police and Crime Commissioner Election
 2. Cullompton Neighbourhood Planning Referendum
 3. Two District by-elections (Taw and Westex wards)
 4. A number of town and parish elections (number growing all the time)
- The district elections will be funded by MDDC. All other elections will be recharged to the relevant authority. The Cabinet Office is yet to confirm whether there will be national funding for election PPE.

Member Services

The Member Services Team continues to provide support, advice and assistance to elected Members and Council Officers both informally and through the formal decision-making structure of the Council and maintaining and improving the quality of decision making throughout the Council.

This year Carole Oliphant, Member Services Officer, completed the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) Certificate in Democratic Services Knowledge (Level 4 – qualification) and was presented with her certificate at an online awards ceremony in November 2020. The certificate is seen as good grounding for anyone working in Democratic Services and will complement Carole's existing knowledge and skills.

The Member Services Manager, Sally Gabriel, has been working with ADSO for a number of years, supporting and assessing learners working towards the Certificate in Democratic Services Knowledge, she will now step up by mentoring, supporting and assessing learners who are studying for their Diploma in Local Democracy (Level 6 – qualification)

Meetings support – The team supports services to the Council, Cabinet, Committees, Policy Development Groups and working groups etc. Providing advice on meeting procedures and legislation. Ongoing work continues on a day to day basis in this regard with the monitoring of decisions to be made via the Forward Plan, the publication of agendas for all meetings (formal and informal) and the preparation of minutes and actions from these minutes.

Throughout the pandemic, the team have been working from home and have daily meetings via Skype to discuss work programmes and for well-being purposes. The team has continued to support Members and meetings through the Zoom platform. 63 public meetings have been hosted since April 2020 following the publication of the legislation which allowed for remote meetings to take place, along with 61 briefings for the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Cabinet, Committees and PDG's. The remote meetings have required additional officer time, as all public meetings have required a clerk and a host to be present. The team has also supported 21 working/advisory group meetings within this period.

It is worth mentioning here, how well Members have coped with the transition to remote meetings. The whole process of remote meetings was a complete culture change for everyone and although some Members required extensive training by the team, attendance at meetings has been excellent; debates and decision-making have taken place and although there have been some broadband issues, the Zoom platform has held up to allow the business of the Council to continue.

Member Training – the regular programme of training has not been progressed this year due to the current climate. The shared service (with other Devon authorities) for Member Development has been paused for the current year, due to the pandemic, however one session on Chairing Skills did take place (remotely) with 4 members attending. 5 in-house sessions have also taken place which were well attended.

Civic – Chairman’s PA – one member of the team continues in her role as PA to the Chairman. The Chairman has not attended any civic events due to the current pandemic, he has however recorded several video messages for special events and has kept in touch with his civic colleagues. The officer also organised the laying of wreaths and the firing of maroons on Armistice Day as normal procedures for that day were not possible.

Independent Remuneration Panel - Provision of support and assistance to the Independent Remuneration Panel on their annual review of Members Allowances. Administration support is provided to the IRP throughout the year.

Town and Parish Councils - A member of the team is also provides specific support as the single point of contact for the town and parish councils. She also provides a monthly town and parish newsletter.

Scrutiny/Policy Research – The Policy and Research Officer continues to support to the Scrutiny Committee and Policy Development Groups with regard to research, providing information and report writing. Specific work has taken place with the Customer Engagement Working Group, the Menopause Working Group and the Net Zero Advisory Group. A working group looking at Planning Enforcement has also been established in the past few weeks. The officer is also working with the Cabinet Member for Climate Change progressing work following the Climate Change Declaration which has included arranging ‘Climate Conversations’ with local stakeholders and administering the Net Zero Advisory Group.

Health Services

Mid Devon Leisure supports and leads on health initiatives across the district via variety of Referral schemes. These schemes are either funded through the health sector, or subsidised and included in the pay and play activities across the Mid Devon Leisure portfolio. Access to the facilities is also available for 3rd party organisations to deliver health and wellbeing sessions to their own clients.

Following Government instruction to close facilities in March 2020, all activity ceased until the phased reopening as previously updated in August 2020. Following the reintroduction of; fitness (Gym) and group exercise classes, swimming lessons, lane swimming, aquatic clubs and schools, with outdoor clubs and organisations accessing the pitches, participation was increasing steadily as can be seen in table 1 below. The impact of the national restrictions enforced in November again meant the closure of the facilities from 5th November to 2nd December, which upon reopening with the fullest compliment of facilities and activities in a Covid safe environment, showed healthy participation, albeit restricted and notwithstanding the normal lower levels of participation in December.

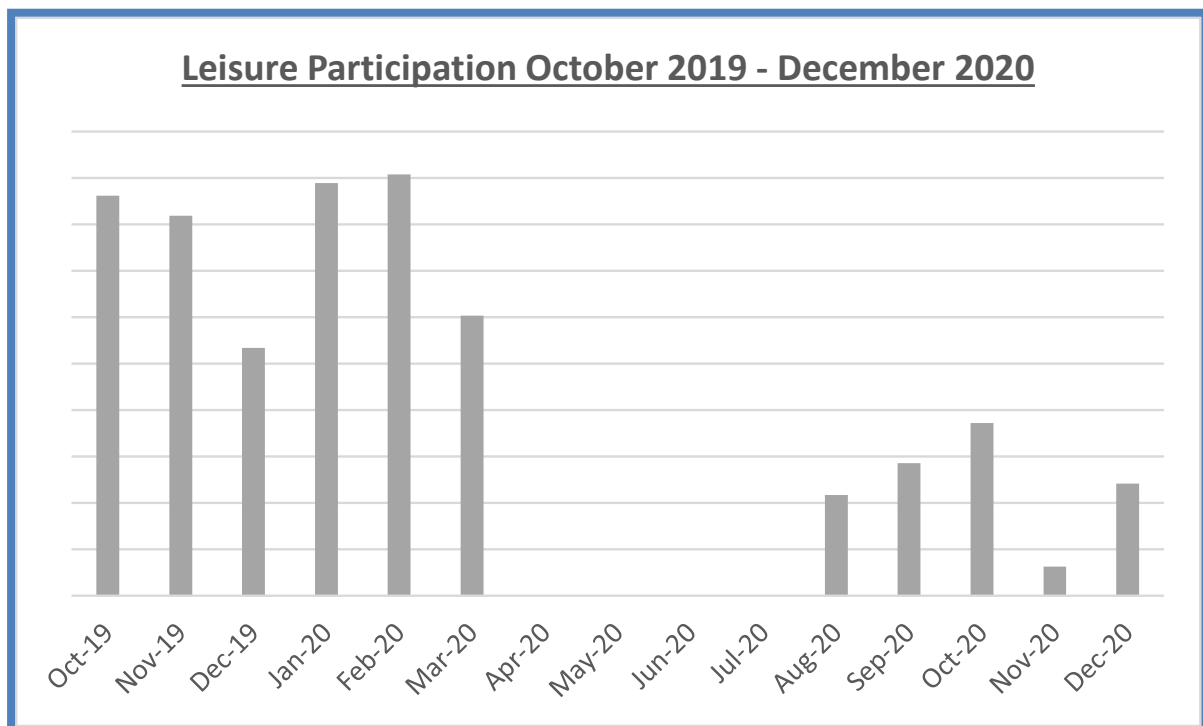


Table 1 – Leisure Participation Oct 19 – Dec 20.

Mid Devon Leisure continues to network with the Devon Leisure Local Authority Partnership for sharing of best practice and progress for reopening of facilities, and the South West Leisure Group hosted by the Local Government Association. Both groups collaborate regarding the plight of the in house leisure provider and outsourced operators.

During the period March 20 to December 20, there were minimal opportunities to safely recommence the health referrals; Cancer Rehabilitation (NHS), Escape Pain (NHS), Strength & Balance Pilot (NHS), Walking Football (Active Devon/Public Health), Cardiac Rehabilitation, GP Referrals or 3rd Party Organisations. This is likely to be the case until social distancing measures are relaxed, following the roll out of the vaccination programme.

Whilst operating in Tier 2, facilities can remain open though the change to tier 3 at the end of December meant that some activities have needed to be discontinued. Should we be placed into Tier 4 this would mean a further closure of the facilities.

Mid Devon District Council and Mid Devon Leisure continue to monitor the local and National position closely.

CUSTOMER SERVICES

This year has been a year unlike any other. Customer Services have had to severely restrict physical access to customer service and transfer customer contact to telephone and online.

The table below illustrates the shift in customer contact during 2020 in comparison to the year before.

Contact Method	Dec 2019 – Nov 2020	Increase/Decrease
Number of visitors to the office for enquiries	5333	-64%
Telephone Payments (including automated)	47698	-21%
Calls to call centre	96381	-10%
Calls to direct lines (not including calls to mobiles)	300345	-11%
Emails Received	Over 1.4 Million	+40%
Digital Payments	98063	+10%
Kiosk Payments	6352	-60%
Online- forms submitted	44101	+6.5%

This has been difficult for the staff, but they have risen to the challenge. Traditional face-to-face (F2F) transactions had to decrease and staff were concerned for the welfare of our customers. However, both staff and customers have shown resilience. Those that still need direct contact have been able to visit during vastly restricted hours, but they have been able to do so safely for them and our staff.

Interestingly customer contacts have decreased via telephone too for payments and other issues and we have seen a continued shift to digital transactions. We have also seen a significant increase in emails. The number above relates to a corporate-wide figure and a significant increase will be due to officers now working from home.

Customer Services specifically has seen an increase in email traffic. This is probably one of the most ineffective ways to transact with the council as failure to provide enough information about a request up front results in multiple emails between staff and customers, adding delay in for the customer. During 2021 as we look to improve services via a potential new CRM and other customer focussed projects, it important that we ensure our digital provision moves our customers away from email. Not everyone likes filling out online forms, but to maximise any investment we make in staff training or systems we will need to move our customers to this method. So we'll be looking to understand barriers to digital.

2020 has been a difficult and an unusual year for everyone due to Covid. From mid-March 2021 we focussed on maintaining as normal a service as we were able and trialling home working in a small way. In late summer we increased the number of staff working from home to ensure that we had resilience and were minimising exposure within the team as we predicted a second wave of the virus which came to pass.

During the first national lockdown, whilst the Customer Services team focussed on business as usual, the Customer Services management team worked with a number of staff from different services to set up the Shielding hub which facilitated the national food delivery service. During that time we helped co-ordinate deliveries, customer requests for food and other help 7 days a week. We sign-posted for hardship and contacted local community groups around the district to confirm what help was available to vulnerable residents. This team was stood back up for the second round of national restrictions and continued to monitor over the Christmas/New Year period.

Customer Service management also provided out of hours duty manager cover with our call monitoring service for emergencies for residents, tenants and property ensuring those most in urgent need had appropriate access to help.

We have carried some vacancies during 2020, although new starters will commence in January 2021. During 2020 we provided a very experienced member of staff to take up the new Customer Welfare Officer post to help the increasing number of customers with hardship and other needs as a result of Covid. We also released resource temporarily during Nov/Dec in order to shore up the Economic Development team with the processing of grants to ensure businesses got the support they were entitled to.

As we move into 2021 we will continue to see the effects of Covid for some months yet. But there have been many positives to come out of this. There has been closer working with other services. Putting customer need before service need and the resource where it is most urgently needed. MDDC has proved that 'it can' and with the customer focussed projects planned for 2021 we hope to build on this new willingness to do things a bit differently.

LEGAL SERVICES

The small Legal Services team provides legal advice and support across the full range of council functions. Where, due to capacity or expertise, some work requests cannot be undertaken in-house, external advice is commissioned. However, that is kept to an absolute minimum. Court advocacy is mostly undertaken by the solicitors – unless it is a particularly complex matter, or when there are no advocates available for the date set by the court. The Legal Services team have also carried out some court hearings via BT Meet me for the first time as a result of the pandemic.

Some high level stats by way of a snapshot of activity are:

- 4 extensions to Closure Orders
- Significant work on the Dog Public Spaces Protection Order
- Anti-Social Behaviour cases, including Injunctions when needed
- Committal Proceedings for breaches of Injunction for threats against council employees
- Advising on numerous Contracts and potential litigation cases
- Licensing & Regulatory matters – attendance and advising at Hearings and also providing ongoing legal advice regarding Covid-19 and ongoing legislative changes

- 11 completed S106 Agreements, numerous ongoing
- Temporary Stop Notices/Enforcement Notices
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Prosecution and advising on other HMO cases
- Successful Health and Safety Prosecution, now appealed
- 7 Housing Disrepair cases
- Several Right to Buy sales completed and ongoing
- Completed one repurchase of Council houses and have two more in progress
- Advising on, drafting, negotiating and completion of numerous new Leases, Renewal Leases and Deed of Variations
- Completed the purchase of land at Post Hill
- General Property legal advice both commercial and housing stock, boundaries, easements (rights of way, drainage, footpaths), responsibilities for maintenance and ownership

Members of the team have also undertaken the following work, in addition to day to day legal advice on planning, housing, licensing, property, contracts, employment and all other council functions:

- Tree Preservation Orders
- Advising on Assets of Community Value
- Recovering debts such as Council Tax, and applying to court for Charging Orders
- Advice throughout the pandemic on gas safety issues
- Housing possessions and debt recovery
- Dealing with any LGSCO complaints

The team provides advice and support in and to council meetings and considers the legal implications of all reports going to them. Where policies (new and updated) are referred to members, these will also have been through Legal Services before issue.

In May the team welcomed a new Solicitor Deborah Sharpley who although joined us during the initial lockdown has since become an asset to the team. Two team members are also undertaking professional qualification training – to practise as a Chartered Legal Executive and as a Paralegal respectively. Maria de Leburne (Legal Services Team Leader) was shortlisted for ‘Legal Professional of the Year’ at the national annual Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) awards. The award ceremony was postponed from 2 April 2020 to 2 July 2020. Maria de Leburne came second in this category and was ‘Highly Commended’.

Cllr Nikki Woollatt

Cabinet Member for Working Environment and Support Services

January 2021

