Feedback from Governance Session – Mid Devon District Council 1st December 2020

On the 1st December 2020, the LGA facilitated a remote Governance session with MDDC, which was well attended by 25 elected members as well as the council's Senior Leadership Team.

The session was not designed as part of a wider piece of work whereby the LGA are supporting a Working Group established by the Council to review current governance arrangements. The outcomes of this session will be reported back to the Working Group (via this note) and will be taken into consideration at their next meeting, alongside the findings from a public engagement session held in the preceding week.

This short note shows the results from some questions asked during the session as well as some thoughts and suggestions which the Working Group may wish to consider in moving their review forward.

Cllr Jim McKenna (LGA Peer) and Emily McGuinness (LGA Programme Manager) will be attending the next meeting of the Working Group to present this report as well as support options for 'next steps'.

Below is our feedback from the session:

In response to question 1: What three words would you use to describe what you think 'good governance' should look and feel like?
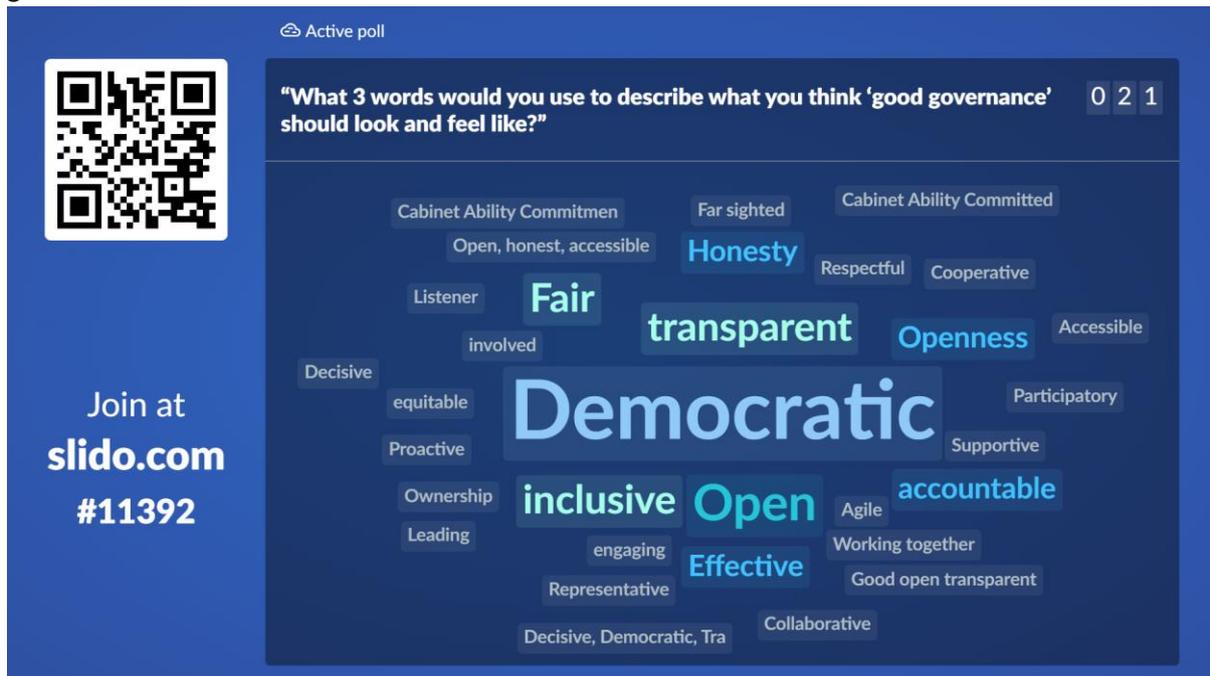
Democratic, Open, Transparent, Fair, Accountable, Effective, Honesty are the most prominent words showing their importance to members. Taken together, these 7 words could be a sound set of **Design Principles** for the Working Group to use moving forward.

Question 2 asked members, " What three things about governance at MDDC would you like to keep?"

Scrutiny and **Cabinet** are the clear front runners in this response, which again is a useful 'line in the sand' for the Working Group to refer to, Policy Development Groups are also valued, and were

mentioned several times during discussion, although the role and function of the groups would benefit from further clarity.

Remote meetings and efficiency are also valued along with speed of decision making and positivity - taken together, this would seem to represent the basics of an effective governance system, and support the school of thought that it is potential changes to behaviours and culture which could deliver the greatest impact.

However…..

Question 3 asked, " Which three things about governance arrangements at MDDC would you like to change?"
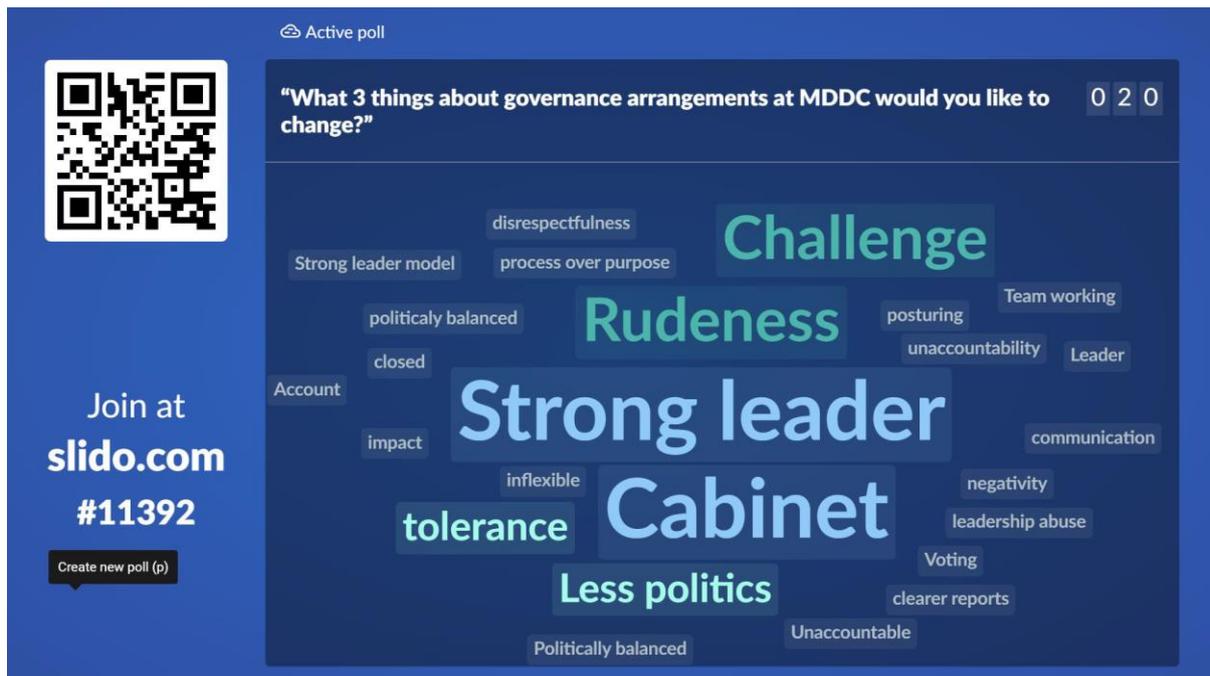
In response to this question – **Strong Leader** and **Cabinet** were also identified as the things most members would like to change! Whilst obviously this contradicts the previous slide, it also indicates that there isn't a strong shared opinion that the Cabinet/Leader model should change, and so there is no clear mandate from this session that structures should be changed, rather that there are concerns around how behaviours are impacting on the success of governance in the eyes of members.

The other high frequency words in this slide are more behavioural (rudeness, less politics, tolerance, challenge) – and there may be some merit in the Working Group spending time discussing how to address these concerns – some councils have a set of behaviours that members have drawn up themselves, and use to support more effective relationships?

The second half of the session looked at the **RACI** model, and through the group exercises – which involved members from all groups, with varying levels of experience and a mix of Executive and Non-executive members – it became clear that there is a lack of clarity around where accountability lies within the council – and there was some realisation that all members have accountability for the most important decisions, via their role on full council. It was also evident that there is room to

improve the opportunities for genuine consultation of members who are outside the Executive – and that consultation must be synonymous with an opportunity to influence and not a 'tick box exercise'.

Policy Development Panels appear to be valued – although there is some confusion over their exact role within the decision making process – especially in relation to Scrutiny. Scrutiny would seem to the area with the greatest potential for improvement, looking to bring forward current best practice around Scrutiny being more around shaping policy ahead of a final decision, bringing to bear the knowledge and experience of non-executive members alongside the views of the community, rather than a role more focused on challenge.

Thoughts for the Working Group

Based on the outcome of this session, the Working Group may wish to consider:

- The session was well attended and they now have a clear set of 'Design Principles' against which to check emerging thoughts and proposals;
- There is no clear mandate to change existing structures, but there is a clear recognition that behaviours can, and are, impacting on effective governance.
- Further clarity around where Responsibility and Accountability lie as well as creating a shared understanding of Consultation / influence and how this can best achieved.
- Review the role and function of Scrutiny, how this aligns with the Policy Development Panels and how non-executive members can shape decisions – particularly around policy development - prior to the point of decision making.
- How to ensure – via different platforms – all members of the community have the **opportunity** to positively engage with the decision-making process.