

Environment PDG Annual Report

Chairman – Cllr Josh Wright

This has been my first year as Chair of the Environment PDG and what a steep learning curve it was. Cllr Barry Warren handed over the chairship in good order with a committee ready to be open and willing to debate the challenging issues for our community. Making sure it stayed that way was more challenging than I thought it would be. Following all the agenda items and making sure everyone had their say and kept on track took a great deal of concentration and is not as easy as some of our more experienced councillors make it look. I have now developed a few processes to help and would like to thank everyone for their patience and support as I took over the helm.

Our Environment PDG is clearly an important committee for Mid Devon and this is reflected in the wide range of policies discussed this year. The challenging times we have all experienced due to Covid restrictions over the last few years have been eased for many of us because of where we live. When out in the community many people mentioned how grateful they were for supportive communities, access to our beautiful countryside and the amenities we have in our villages and towns. I hope our residents have felt the work of the Environment PDG has reflected this appreciation for where we live.

Looking at the policies we have discussed this year has highlighted the challenge facing local authorities when striking a balance between sound finance and supporting key policies initiatives. I hope residents have felt that the wide ranging discussions we had during the committees reflected the full range of views of all our residents. The foundations we lay now over the next few years will have a big impact on our environment in Mid Devon for the foreseeable future. Ensuring that short term operational issues can be met as well as enabling the wider and more strategic issues to be delivered is the challenge facing the committee over the next few years. I really look forward to ensuring this committee faces this challenge head on and does not shy away from those difficult conversations and represents the views of all Mid Devon residents.

As we look forward, I hope the Group will consider an ambitious programme for the following year that continues to promote actions around climate change, sustainability and improvement to services that impact on our local environment.

I would like to thank all Members for their contributions this year and I look forward to working with you next year to further serve our local communities.

Importantly I would like to thank the Members and Officers for their contributions over the past year, as well as our Clerk, Carole Oliphant, thanks for keep everything organised and your kind support.

Action on Climate Change

Throughout the year the PDG received regular updates on climate change and net zero activity within the Council, and reviewed the progress of the Climate Action Plan (CAP).

Discussions within the PDG have considered a range of issues in relation to climate change, including: the number of electric charging points in the District; sustainable farming practices; increasing collection of pots and pans; grants that the Council has applied for with relation to climate change activity; decarbonisation of the council's housing stock; and green alternatives for the councils transport fleet.

At the start of the year members of the Net Zero Advisory Group (NZAG) brought a Motion recognising the action taken on climate change within the council. That Motion was deferred to the PDG to consider. Notably the Motion welcomed the ongoing work within the council, and recognised the need for a ring fenced budget to develop work on climate change. The PDG approved that Motion and requested that a future budget for climate change be created.

In January the PDG reviewed budget proposals that might be prioritised to help move ahead with the CAP. Members heard a number of proposals which identified ways to reduce the Council's carbon footprint and support the wider Climate and Sustainability Programme. As a result the PDG recommended that the potential additional budget requirements linked to the climate investment opportunities be considered.

The PDG will continue to monitor progress on the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, and receive regular updates on the activity of the NZAG (a summary of NZAG activity is attached the end of this report).

Presentation from Mary Quicke MBE

In March 2021 Members received an insightful overview of farming and climate change from local farmer Mary Quicke MBE. Mary Quicke MBE explained working practices on her farm and the importance of understanding the complex systems of sustainability. She talked about how the world had worked together to overcome the challenge of the pandemic, and that similar cooperation was going to be required to tackle climate change. The PDG agreed that it is time to challenge the normal systems of food production and for people to become conscientious consumers who are knowledgeable about how their food is produced and where it comes from.

Approval of the Public Spaces Protection (Dog Control) Order

The PDG has continued to review the revised Public Spaces Protection (Dog Control) Order (PSPO) after the PSPO expired in October 2020. The PDG last year recommended that the PSPO be redrafted to take account of public consultation responses and a revised version be brought in front of the PDG. In April the Group recommended that the fixed penalty for breach of the PSPO be set at the maximum permitted of £100 and in July we heard the responses to the consultation.

It became apparent that a couple of areas had been missed in the consultation, and it was agreed that the PSPO would be brought into force and that a variation adding the two areas would be brought back to the Environment PDG at a later date. In November we considered the proposed variation, and recommended that the Cabinet authorise the variation to include the two areas in the PSPO.

Approval of the Tree Policy

The PDG received the five yearly review of the Tree Policy. After discussion about which trees are subject to the policy, and when pruning of trees is allowed, Members requested an addition to the Policy so that it would be possible for some stock to be removed to allow the growth of new trees which would keep woodlands sustainable. Members subsequently approved the policy.

Moving to a three weekly waste collection

The November 2020 Environment PDG gave authorisation for a Recycling and Waste trial covering approximately 1000 properties to be carried out in Mid Devon. The Council carried out the trial between July and October 2021 to measure the effect of residual waste being collected at three weekly intervals. The trial was piloted over a three month period in both a rural and urban area to assess the impact of such a change being introduced in the district. The findings from the trial were presented to the PDG in January.

During the trial the percentage of residual waste reduced and the percentage of wet recycling (food) increased. Having wheeled bins in the trial areas improved the street scene and reduced the amount of residual waste. After discussion around the use of enforcement, whether houses would need additional bins, and concerns whether residents would have to drag wheelie bins up farm tracks and driveways, the PDG recommended that the council move to a three weekly waste collection, with food collected every week and recycling collected every two weeks, with bins provided by the Council.

Finalisation of the Litter Strategy

The PDG formed a Working Group to look at the creation and detail of the Litter Strategy and how the council would enforce and educate on the issue. The aim of the strategy is to engage with partners, the community and the public to reduce littering in the District. Following involvement by the Working Group, and discussion in the PDG about how to ensure the strategy is measurable and achievable, the PDG recommended that the Mid Devon District Council Litter Strategy be adopted.

Engagement with the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change

Throughout the year the PDG has heard regular updates from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change and considered ways to improve services. In discussion with the Cabinet Member, Members heard and considered the impact of staffing on the waste service, and how the workforce was facing pressure on the front line services due to vacancies, especially for HGV drivers. Members also raised the unacceptable wait for bulky waste collections in some areas of the district, and asked that rapid car charging opportunities were relayed to the Town and Parishes.

Budget – identifying potential savings

Discussions on the budget throughout the year looked at how to close the current deficit within the council, and to identify any potential savings. The PDG discussed a range of options being considered by officers for budget savings, as well as the potential savings from the three weekly bin trial.

Net Zero Advisory Group 2021-2022 Annual Summary

The Net Zero Advisory Group (NZAG) is an advisory group under the Environment PDG and it group continues to consider topics including, but not limited to, climate

and biodiversity. Chaired by Cllr Elizabeth Lloyd, NZAG meetings take place on alternate months to the Environment PDG to enable a regular feedback cycle. The group provides a valuable informal forum to look into topic detail, support and adopt work elements of the PDG, and help disseminate information between Members.

During 2021-2022 NZAG activity and discussion included:

- The Council's Climate Action Plan.
- Monitoring the Council's Carbon Footprint, and our trajectory of actual emissions versus annual target emissions.
- The need to move forward with a selection of opportunities to invest budget in addressing climate change. For example, the proposal for a 'Community Climate & Biodiversity Support Fund'.
- The Sustainable Procurement Review – the Corporate Manager for Finance and Procurement briefed and updated the NZAG in December.
- Ways to increase climate knowledge, literacy and capacity at Mid Devon District Council.
- How to further develop organisational culture, policies and procedures to support local sustainability and prosperity through decision making, for example aligned to Doughnut Economics.
- Policy to support communities and individuals to reduce their climate impact, and to reduce areas of the Council's carbon footprint, such as: policies to maximise the environmental and social benefits of home/blended working; and policies to accelerate the improvement of energy performance in buildings.
- Planning policies and practice in relation to heritage, and policies to promote sustainable construction and retrofit.
- Examples of sustainability work by other authorities.
- How to promote and celebrate sustainable farming practices in Mid Devon.
- Community/parish wildlife projects, tree aftercare, citizen science etc.
- Council practice for Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) and the potential for 'amenity' (in relation to legislation and best practice) to include the contribution of trees to benefits such as biodiversity support and carbon capture.