

Public Question Time

Paul Elstone

Question 1

My questions relate to agenda items 8 & 9 - MDDC Budget and in particular revenue and 3 Rivers ability to pay back debt. Questions especially relevant as it is calculated that there is over Four million pounds of bad debt exposure fully related to 3 Rivers that will somehow need to be accounted for going forward. A bad debt that is very likely to increase significantly and with increasing potential for MDDC to be placed in special measures. A Local Newspaper has this week quoted the Managing Director of 3 Rivers as saying.

Quote: "We were thrilled with the overly positive response we received at St Georges Court last weekend". Unquote, this statement made as a result of a special and well-advertised sales event, but it is widely being suggested that only seven people attended this event. Can the Councillor Director of 3 Rivers fully clarify the position?

Answer:

This question should be directed to the company.

Question 2

Even though the St Georges Court property marketing commenced in May 2022 it is being widely suggested that 3 Rivers have sold no properties to date. Can the Councillor Director confirm how many of the 39 properties have had sales contracts fully signed?

Answer:

This question should be directed to the company.

Question 3

A press article in the Crediton Courier posted early yesterday including a photograph of a recently dismissed MDDC Cabinet Member states that the New Independent Cabinet are proposing to permanently close the children's paddling pools at Crediton and Tiverton. Given that it was the very first New Independent Cabinet Meeting yesterday morning and after the article was posted, I question the integrity of this statement. This as no cabinet decision had been taken. My understanding is that the new cabinet voted for the following.

- a) To keep the paddling pools open and to allocate full funds to do so. Is this correct?
- b) Additionally, to make serious changes to the previously proposed and excessive car parking charges. Is this correct?
- c) Furthermore to support the MDDC Full Council recommendation not to approve the proposed 3 Rivers Business Plans is an attempt to limit further bad debt. Is this correct?

Answer:

- a) On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.
- b) On 22 February, Full Council resolved to cease the then current parking consultation and seek alternative options to be reviewed by Economy PDG before coming back to Cabinet for decision in due course. This was agreed by Cabinet on 7 March.
- c) On 22 February, Full Council resolved not to approve any business plan that has been put before the Cabinet/Council. This was agreed by Cabinet on 7 March.

Question 4

At the last Full Council Meeting I asked if the MDDC CEO would implement the Fraud Investigation into 3 Rivers requested by the previous Leader of the Council. A written answer remains outstanding. At this time a simple yes or no answer tonight will do.

Answer:

I can confirm that discussions have been had with the council's auditors relating to some of the queries raised by the former Leader and I would expect to see these addressed in a future audit report in order to provide assurance on these matters.

Jo Carpenter

I'm Jo I am a founder of Active Parents Tiverton helping families with 0-5 year olds in Tiverton. I have had that role for 6 years in Tiverton voluntarily just to support people. I am here tonight as a deeply concerned parent and I live in the West Exe area. I hope as well that I can speak for some vulnerable families that I am aware of and I have worked with through my voluntary roles and my role with Action For Children.

I know we're here to discuss West Exe paddling pool just wanted to point out things to consider, according to Swim England 1 in 3 children currently can't swim at all, that's a scary thought for me as a parent, they also say that a 7 year old should be able to swim the width of a pool without any trouble. My son is 7 he cannot swim at all. I know for you guys it may just be a paddling pool but I wanted to point out how important this is for local parents. For a parent of a child who cannot swim I think about my opportunities to help him, our own leisure centre is too expensive. For a family of 2 adults and 2 children under 5 it would cost nearly £20 to attend. If I took my son swimming that needs to be consistent, I can't find £20 all the time and I can't do that consistently it's too expensive. The waiting list for swimming lessons itself is 18 months, this is appalling for a 7 year old, I can't get him a swimming lesson.

A private swimming lesson for half an hour would be £20, this is all unaffordable for a parent like me and I'm not the only one. People in Tiverton are 183 in the que for a private swimming lesson, we can't get swimming, so we need swimming confidence that's what this pool does for us. The nearest beach is too far for some families if they can't drive and we're excluding people who can't afford it. So for people of Tiverton we have had 2 years of no swimming due to Covid. A lot of our primary school children cannot swim and are probably 3 years behind now from what I know,

for the options that are non-existent when they do become available they're unaffordable. There are families in Tiverton who live in flats, you will be aware of these figures, they have no garden, they have nowhere to play and they have no experience of water play. Water play is proven scientifically to help with mental health and now our only option to build up some kind of water confidence is potentially being taken away. West Exe paddling pool is special to us all, there is already a huge divide for people who can afford to do the basic things. So my question will be what will you do to support the parents and carers of Tiverton to be able to inclusively access affordable and accessible water confidence going forward if you close this pool?

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.

Tony Savill

If lockdown and Covid-19 has taught us anything it has to be the value of outdoor space particularly for children who need places to play, to unwind and to just be kids. Too often facilities within this group are cut without any real thought on the impact of physical and mental health of the children who use them. If play facilities continue to decline at the current rate our communities could look very different very soon and once they disappear they're usually gone forever. We're in danger of short changing children particularly those from the 1 in 8 households without gardens and those in the most disadvantaged groups.

I would like to know if the Council instead of seeing the pools as a cost, are investigating the possibility of monetising it as a self-funded resource, by either sponsorship, advertising or through the renting the space around the pool for mobile catering facilities, such as a coffee van or an ice-cream van. I'm sure most parents there would appreciate the opportunity to grab a coffee while their kids play, so this could be an attractive proposal for them I'm sure. I'd also like to know whatever saving would be looked at in relation to wastage in the current services the Council deliver. As an example I moved here 7 years ago and was shocked to find that you didn't have wheelie bins, I purchased mine from another local authority and bringing it with me and been using it all this time, this being slightly larger than the Mid Devon bins, been using it and just about, having 2 children in nappies just about copes and fills that bin with the new 3 weekly bin collection.

Last week had a label put on it saying they're not going to empty it anymore because it wasn't issued by the council and that I've got to use the new bin which is too small. So I've now got have another new bin issued. I was considering returning my other bin as I didn't need it, so now I'm actually going to have 2 bins from you and a bin you're going to have to pay to get rid of when I take it to the tip, and it's given me more capacity which is counterproductive on my incentive to recycle. If this has happened to me then there must be hundreds of other example of waste that should be looked at before cutting facilities, and whilst the council is wasting money with

computer says no style rules, you surely cannot be comfortable with stealing joy from our children by closing the only paddling pool in the area.

Can you as a group of Councillors genuinely say there's not £8,000 savings to be made in a £417,790 accounting budget? There's £386,700 human resources budget, the £1.26m IT budget, the £306,890 forward planning budget or even the £11,300 printing budget for Phoenix House. Does the council use a zero budgeting method for sussing budgets if they did that might help you to highlight the real costs and not roll on wastage year on year. So to summarise and just to be clear I would like to know if monetisation of the pool has been considered before wastages within the Council has been looked at and that there are no other budgets which morally should be cut first. And if the council are zero budgeting strategy to increase budget transparency.

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.

Danielle Furminger

I'm a local West Exe resident, last summer we had extreme heat in this country and probably due to climate change our summers are getting hotter and longer. The West Exe pool is a vital resource for our community, it allows parents and carers to pick their children up from school, continue to use the park and exercise safely, knowing that they can cool down. So my question is how can it even be considered, how can you justify even considering closing it? There's been talk that the Town Council refused the budgeting. I know that at the time I don't think they were told what it was for, they weren't given a breakdown of the costs at the time of the request so I don't think this is your responsibility and you need to say how you can justify how you can take this away from children.

As a local West Exe resident I'm also concerned about what this will do to the park. Already I get to enjoy the sight of the covered seating area being encased in metal fencing, it's an eyesore, and it could have been converted into a stand for coffees or local ice creams or something like that. That could help provide funding for the pool but instead it diminishes the area and diminishes the value. Are we going to have this to look forward to in the local areas? Is this going to become another eyesore and further demoralise our community? And finally I would just like to ask if the Council has an answer for this, and if they are going to save the pool, have they put it to the top of the agenda so we can all go home?

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.

Oliver Lash-Williams

I'm currently helping my four-year-old son learn to take responsibility for his actions and also to improve his counting. Could MDDC help me explain to him why he and his friends should bear responsibility for adults failing to count properly by losing their paddling pool in West Exe this summer? He will also likely have an immediate supplementary question, formed as a statement "it's not fair".

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.

Andrea Glover

I live within the Lower Culm ward, with Mid Devon struggling to run local services, not being able to keep up with inflation. Can I ask that Mid Devon meet with Local Towns, Parishes to look at services and land that could be passed back and managed? I say this in a way by looking at certain things that the Parish and Town Councils do, having cross overs with what Mid Devon say they do and I think there should be some in-depth discussions going on between the Town and Parish Councils, looking at our budgets on a line by line basis, a more in-depth discussion happens in the future.

Answer:

The Council is engaged in ongoing dialogue with local town and parish councils in such respects.

Laura Hampshire

I'm a clinical service manager in a child and adolescent mental health service for the South West. The Government 10 year plan is focused on levelling up mental health services with physical health provision. Their plan recognises that Covid has had a disproportionately negative effect on young people's mental health. Given that we know that being outdoors, exercising and socialising is vital to good mental health, please can you tell me how shutting a facility like this fits into the Government plan? And how is the Council looking to address their role in keeping young people well?

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.

Stacey Gray

I am the Town Centre Coordinator for Tiverton, I am actually here as part of the Town Centre Partnership (TCP) and I would like to address the issue of the parking that was addressed at the last Full Council meeting. In light of the public feeling that was expressed very clearly at the Full Council meeting last month, with regards to the planned increase in parking charges, I have been asked by the Town Centre Partnership to request further clarity as to when it's expected that the new parking charges will be decided. It is understood that Councils across the UK are facing financial challenges, but it is my hope and for the TCP and many of our local residents that these new charges will be balanced and fair. As this is seen as crucial for ensuring sustained economic growth, can I ask if Mid Devon District Council will release these new dates to the public in a way that is visible and enables time to respond? Can I also ask that Mid Devon District Council considers looking at the benefit of 30 minutes free parking to allow residents to pop in and use local facilities such as the bank and post office that are so vital to the businesses of this town? And lastly, can I ask that Mid Devon District Council considers the benefits of free parking after 6pm to encourage a broader night time economy that we are so vastly in need of.

Answer:

On 22 February, Full Council resolved to cease the then current parking consultation and seek alternative options to be reviewed by Economy PDG before coming back to Cabinet for decision in due course. This was agreed by Cabinet on 7 March.

Sophia Beard

This also is on the issue of the pool and also on behalf of the Tiverton Town Centre Partnership. So the structure of Tiverton itself, including the one way traffic system through the centre has created quite a fragmented feel to the retail sector within Tiverton. Albeit a small town, the shops are spread on a fairly wide area and it creates difficulty for the flowing of footfall.

We're at a disadvantage in comparison to other towns that have a close knit, easier flowing layout. And as retailers we are however trying to make the best of this. I'm celebrating the fact the town centre is made up of a collection of different areas and part of this includes the naming of individual areas into quarters and we are now referring them to enable us to collectively advertise as a town centre.

However, each quarter faces different challenges and has different attractions and this is why the Tiverton Town Centre Partnership has representatives from each quarter and stresses issues and the priorities for the respective business owners of those different quarters varies significantly. The primary concern of those and my business indeed is also within the West Exe quarter or riverside quarter, is made up of West Exe North and South, Bridge Street, Angel Hill and any other businesses that would sit within that area.

The proposed closure of the West Exe pool would have a direct negative impact on those riverside quarter businesses. Throughout the summer season, we currently benefit from an increase of footfall into the area from Town, otherwise it's an area that'd not ventured into. My business has been there for 4 years at the top of Angel Hill and yet still every day, every week, every Saturday we will get local people or

people from outside who didn't know we were there and ask how long have you been here. I actually went shopping during the week, this last week and I was on Gold Street and I was shopping in there because I like to keep it local where I can. To someone from behind a shop counter, I said I got some time off from the shop, they asked what shop is that and I told them and they didn't know because they hadn't been to that side of town.

The problem that we have as a town centre in Tiverton is real, the disadvantage that the West Exe area has is significant and the increased footfall of parents, of grandparents, of tourists because we are a market town and Mondays are pretty quiet. The fact that we can direct them down to the town asset, that is the paddling pool, is an income generating asset to the town and its businesses. We estimate that the economic losses and the impact on that area would exceed the £8,000 proposed in the upkeep investment that you are wanting to take off your bottom line. And the fact is that mothballing that facility in the long term essentially is closure, you're not going to stretch that budget back out and find it. Once it is gone it is gone. So to mirror and add to what has been said by people behind me, you're going to continue to watch the West Exe area degenerate, if people have a positive impact because they're taking their children there because they've grown up and been next to that pool, they will then grow up to respect the area. Will the council recognise that there is an economic as well as a social case against the closure of the pool at West Exe? And cease preposterous proposal of mothballing it or worse.

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.

Clawdette Harrower

Good evening I am Clawdette Harrower, Tiverton Town Councillor for West Exe and this year Deputy Mayor of Tiverton. Following a meeting held in West Exe rec on Saturday the 4 March, Councillors with great respect I bring to you a pray say message of many Tivertonians who vehemently oppose this seemingly outrageous suggestion to close the paddling pool in Tiverton rec. Many ask, why are we not putting the wellbeing of our children at the top of our priority list? Surely, they are a viable investment. I have been approached by grandparents and parents, many of whom regaled me of fond stories of how having themselves played as and later with their own children in this pool. A mother who has an autistic child contributed to some comments I'm about to relay to you: isn't play vital towards mental and physical health, learning to jump into the pool all by yourself helps with building confidence.

Learning to swim in the pool is vital, it's not being frightened to swim in the big swimming pool where continuing to learn to swim could ultimately save a life. Councillors, we too know about budgets and economy, for many of us this year holidays will again be spent at home. School summer holidays are long and not only for our children but for our parents too. Why close one of the very things that brings so many of us outdoors and with such joy? It doesn't just benefit the children it

benefits we parents who have a chance to meet up with other parents, make friends and enjoy our community and socialise.

The pool isn't free, we know, because our taxes pay towards it. We also know that this entire iconic facility is well loved and well used. This is evidenced by over 3,000 and counting signatures on a petition that we have collected. And to conclude, on March 27 the Town Clerk tells me that Tiverton Town Full Council will be discussing any way in which we could help this situation resolve, at least starting with this year. And then during this coming year, we Councillors, the public's elected representatives could use some of our energies to find a way forward to support this project for our future generations to enjoy. Parents want to help, to be involved, given a breathing space this year going forward groups could be formed to help support a pool project.

We know that the breakdown operating costs are only estimates and we are hopeful that the costs could be less than anticipated. Other things to be considered later are the toilet block in the park and the shelter. Each no longer in use, due to ill repair and antisocial behaviour. My question then would be, today is about the paddling pool and our constituents ask for it to be secured for them and their families to continue to enjoy in their future, please will you?

Answer:

On 7 March, Cabinet recommended to Full Council an amendment to the previously proposed budget for £15k to be added back to the budget, funded from reserves, to fund the operational aspects of the paddling pools. This was agreed by Full Council on 8 March. Further options will be explored to secure the long term future of the paddling pools.