

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **COMMUNITY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 22 August 2023 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

B Holdman (Chairman)
D Broom, G Cochran, C Connor (Vice Chairman), A Cuddy,
R Gilmour, H Tuffin, C Harrower and S Robinson

Apologies

Councillors

A Glover

Also Present

Councillors

J Lock, J Cairney and D Wulff

Present

Officers:

Maria De Leiburne (District Solicitor and Monitoring Officer), Lisa Lewis (Corporate Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change), Dean Emery (Corporate Manager for Revenues, Benefits and Recovery), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager), Jason Ball (Climate and Sustainability Specialist), Lynsey Chilcott (Customer Services Manager), Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer) and David Parker (Member Services & Policy Research Officer)

12 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (0.03.47)

Apologies were received from Cllr A. Glover, Cllr R. Gilmour attended in her place.

Cllrs. E. Buczkowski, J. Buczkowski, L. Knight attended via Teams.

13 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (0.04.11)

Mr Martin Freeman read the following statement in connection with Item 7 – Customer Service front desk and regarding opening hours for the MDDC Officers.

Mr Freeman ran a Building design business and quite often for most projects needed to make contact with the Council. He wanted to persuade the Council to open the offices for the whole of working week. He was glad with the new regime and perhaps breath of fresh air to have this opportunity to bring this to their attention. With regard to the Council access from a planning point, he made reference to the history of the relationship between the Council and the general public:

25 years ago there was no restriction, within reason, to access to the offices.

During Covid part-time opening began. The Council has slowly but surely been divorcing itself from the public. He hoped the Councillors would see that the contact the general public has, has gone from what he would expect to a part time access arrangement. Since offices had been closed in Cullompton and Crediton, this HQ was the only access the people of Mid Devon have to the Council. The importance of the MDDC HQ - It was a one stop place for the public to get help with services and information from a friendly face for the benefit of the people of Mid Devon as whole for the whole working week. The offices were part of the prestige of the town.

Due to working remotely, the work flow for creative and constructive Ideas wouldn't be happening and not very efficiently (he knew this from his own experience). He mentioned it made it more difficult for the general public to access services, help and information (that the Council had to provide for legal reasons). He said one couldn't have a public service without seeing the public. Mr Freeman queried what was the knock on effect? Some bright spark might come up with the idea the offices may be used as a mini market or eight to late shop!

Mr Freeman brought his statement to a close by saying: As he laid out, the opening hours need to be reinstated for the benefit of all the inhabitants of Mid Devon.

14 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT (0.10.57)**

Members were reminded of the need to make declarations where appropriate.

15 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (0.11.08)**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 27 June 2023 were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

16 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (0.12.11)**

The Chairman requested that members continue to come up with ideas for the work plan so that the committee could be as fruitful as possible.

17 **VULNERABILITY STATEMENT (0.13.07)**

Lisa Lewis (Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement) brought the statement* to the committee at the request of the PDG to help them better understand how the Council deal with customers with vulnerabilities. The report made reference to other policies which detailed how service/practice was amended in light of vulnerability. Appendix 1 gave a list of possible vulnerabilities.

The Corporate Recovery Policy and the Mid Devon Housing Vulnerability Policy detail amendments to council practice in light of some vulnerabilities. The Customer Care Charter and the Council Safeguarding Policy are due for review Autumn 2023 and amended as appropriate with further information around vulnerability.

The report was welcomed and noted the Care Leavers Council Tax Exemption Scheme. It was suggested that the Council should look at its relationship with other groups on the list such as CAB, CHAT, and those helping Refugee schemes and how MDDC could help them.

It was **AGREED** to add "The Council's relationship with other Agencies" to the Work programme.

It was commented that those with learning disabilities and those with what might be called learning difficulties do not want to see themselves included in the same group and so could separate groups be made. It was also suggested that Asylum Seekers and Refugees also be added to the list and that "Late term pregnancy" be changed to "Pregnancy". It was also suggested that at the end of the list there should be a statement that this was not an exhaustive list. The Committee **NOTED** the Vulnerability Statement.

Note: *report previously circulated and attached to the minutes

18 CUSTOMER SERVICE FRONT DESK (0.24.17)

The Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement brought the Customer Service Front Desk Report* to the Committee.

The Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement highlighted the following:

- Phoenix House opening times to the public and that customers can contact by telephone to arrange a face to face appointment at an alternative time if required.
- The telephone contact centre is available Mon-Thu 08:30-17:00 and 08:30-16:40 Friday. That the Council Offices were open and Officers were available via the telephone and on-line between 9.00am and 5.00pm Monday to Friday.
- Before the Covid Pandemic the footfall was reducing exponentially every year and that access to the officers via telephone and on-line was generally preferred by customers, she pointed out that the available face to face appointments were not being filled. At no time did the Council want to reduce the level of service to the customer but resource was channelled as dictated by customer behaviour.

The following was discussed:

- That members of the public don't pre-plan their conversations with the Council and that Councillors' anecdotal experience was that members of the public do want face to face meetings with officers of the Council.
- A councillor had witnessed three people trying to access the Council building including a young lady who had been sent to the Council Offices having just been evicted.
- If the reduced hours for physical access to the building had to stay in place could the closed day be moved to a Friday as it was clear that there were more Council Officers in the building on a Wednesday, the day the building was closed, and less on a Friday when many Council Officers worked from home.
- Could Staff manning the front desk be able to deal with any on-line queries from that position so that when there was no-one to deal with, their time could be utilised. The Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement commented that it wasn't possible to access some of the work from the front desk but that that issue was being looked at.
- When the offices were closed that there be an intercom facility at the front door for members of the public to speak with an officer and where necessary an officer could arrange for someone to open the door for that customer.
- That if the face to face appointment cost as little as the report stated it did at paragraph 3.4 then members of staff should have their pay increased.
- That whilst looking at Customer Engagement the issue of staff safety and security should be considered as there was no available "panic button" and no direct-line to the police – at the moment a member of the customer services team had to call the police.
- The Corporate Manager for Income, Revenues Benefits, Recovery and Leisure commented that his team had run some very large claim schemes paying out very

large amounts in total to those in need and that all of the schemes have been administered on-line and by phoning and writing to customers using a flexible policy to accommodate members of the public. They were now administering the “Housing Support 4 Fund” and again it was all on-line and was evidence that the Council’s customers were very able to access the services by phone and on-line.

- How customers were looked after when they entered the building – were they offered a glass of water for instance. The Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement replied that most customers were seen by appointment and that they were seen within 15 minutes and so that was not necessary.

Regarding the Mid Devon Community Survey, it was asked why 644 people abandoned the survey before they had finished. The Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement replied that the survey was possibly too long and lessons had been learnt for the future. The survey was about the various methods members of the public used to access council services and there was a lot of repetition so it was necessary for the exercise. In future surveys would be shorter taking just a few minutes to complete. It was suggested that there could be an option at the end for those wanting to continue with a longer survey.

The Chairman said that he was minded to set up a working group to consider how the opening hours were affecting vulnerable customers. The Councillors who agreed to sit on the working group were: Cllr B Holdman, Cllr G Cochran, Cllr A Glover and Cllr C Harrower.

The Committee **NOTED** the Customer Services Briefing Report.

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Note: *report previously circulated and attached to the minutes

Note: The Chairman would like the working group to meet on Friday 15th September 2023.

19 **REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT (0.53.28)**

The District Solicitor and Monitoring Officer gave a verbal report that within the last year no applications had been made under this legislation.

20 **FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE UPDATE AND TRAINING* (0.54.14)**

The Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change and the Corporate Manager for Performance and Improvement gave a verbal update and some further training designed to provide greater clarity on the financial responsibilities falling within the remit of the Community Policy Development Group.

Revenue is the Day to Day income and spend and Capital is any expenditure on anything that would last more than one year.

The Pressures on the Community PDG could be summarised as:

- Community Grants, and whether these continued to be awarded.
- Customer Services – CRM project – maximise benefits, channel shift
- Public Health – minimum regulatory requirements +
- Public Health – additional requirements from Govt – Homes for Ukraine
- Planning – the possibility of a recession
- Planning – enforcement
- Planning – appeals

- Leisure – inflation pressure in pay exceeding fee income increases
- Leisure – Swimming pools were loss making
- Leisure centre market position, should the leisure centres aim for high end or low end.

The Mid Term Financial Plan is a 5 year plan on a rolling basis which was refreshed annually. The Corporate Manager for Performance and Improvement had been developing these dashboards for six months and this would be the format how finances would be reported going forward.

It was asked if in future the previous quarter's figures could be shown. In reply The Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change said that the figures were set against the outturn at the end of the year.

It was understood that the statutory spend as against the discretionary spend was about 70/30 and so it was asked if columns could be provided to show the statutory spend and the discretionary spend so as to concentrate minds on what could be changed and the Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change said that he thought that would be a good idea.

Note *Presentation subsequently circulated to members of the PDG

21 **WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023/2024 (1.25.30)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, the *Community Policy Development Group Work Plan for 2022-2023. An update from the Customer Services Front Desk working group would be added to the meeting on 24th October 2023. The Leisure Policy and Pricing strategy would also be looked at the meeting on 24th October 2023.

Note: *Work Plan previously circulated and attached to the minutes

22 **CLIMATE EMERGENCY (1.28.04)**

The Climate and Sustainability Specialist briefed the Policy Development Group as follows:

The Net Zero Advisory Group was to have its first meeting of the new administration on 22 August 2023. There were various subjects that crossed between Policy Development Groups (PDG's) but some of the areas that may be covered by the Community PDG were:

- Energy use at home
- Travel and Transport
- Food and Health
- Lifestyles

The Climate and Sustainability Specialist mentioned the transformation at the Leisure Centres – the Council will use less gas but more electricity but that electricity would be sustainable and would be supplemented by the solar PV being placed on the Leisure Centres.

The Carbon footprint of the Council has gone up over 2022/23 which was disappointing news. We can make a difference by careful selection of our contractors and selecting them bearing in mind their own carbon useage.

There was confusion over Carbon Action Planning – costs were huge and how they were funded matters – any project needed to be feasible and affordable. All possibilities needed to

be looked at so that Councillors could make decisions on an informed basis. Comments were made relating to the Cost –v- Prioritisation argument and the horror of some constituents of the reported spend of £117m on carbon action planning.

The Climate and Sustainability Officer commented that he totally understood that the Council should be careful of what or how information was presented to the public and that the figure mentioned included spending tens of years into the future. It was agreed that communication was key.

(The meeting ended at 3.54 pm)

CHAIRMAN