

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on 14 July 2025 at 5.00pm

**Present
Councillors**

G Westcott (Vice-Chair), C Adcock,
D Broom, E Buczkowski, A Cuddy,
G Czapiewski, M Farrell, C Harrower,
L G J Kennedy, J Poynton and R Roberts

**Apologies
Councillors**

S Robinson and L Knight

**Also Present
Councillor**

L Taylor (Leader of the Council)

**Also Present
Officers:**

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Matthew Page (Head of People, Governance & Waste) and David Parker (Democratic Services & Policy Research Officer)

**Councillors
Online**

M Fletcher, S Keable, J Lock and D Wulff

Officers Online

Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Richard Marsh (Director of Place and Economy), Dean Emery (Head of Revenues and Benefits), Paul Deal (Head of Finance, Property and Climate Resilience), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager), and Laura Woon (Democratic Services Manager).

13 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllrs S Robinson and L Knight. L Knight was substituted by Cllr L G J Kennedy .

14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

No declarations were declared under this item.

At Item 3 (Public Questions) Cllr L G J Kennedy declared an interest that he was a Director of the Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC).

15 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (0:05:00)**

Councillor Barry Warren – Chairman of Willand Parish Council:

It is appreciated that this is all at a very early stage but whatever the final decision is it would appear that Town and Parish Councils will still have a function and need some guidance please. There must be some models or guidance from such proposed unitary authorities which are already in place.

Question 1: What information is available as to the future of Town and Parish Councils after the new authorities are formed?

Response from the Chief Executive:

The process of local government reorganisation (LGR) refers to the intent, by government, to change the structure of principal councils in two-tier areas to remove county and district/city/borough councils, through the process known as unitarisation. This process does not impact on the existence of current town or parish councils, though clearly their relationship with their principal council in future will be with a different entity to those as present.

Question 2: What is the expected time scale for any changes to be implemented?

Response from the Chief Executive:

Government expects the new unitary councils in non-priority areas to be created to take effect from 1 April 2028, though clearly this will be subject to future statutory processes being achieved to enable such a timeline.

Currently Willand Parish Council lease a number of open spaces/play areas from MDDC. Plans are in place for their maintenance, refurbishment and replacement equipment as existing comes to end of life. Contingency funds are set aside for this.

Question 3: Is there any idea as to what will happen to the Leases?

- (a) Will they continue for the full term?
- (b) Should either side cancel the Leases now to stabilise the position?
- (c) What is likely to happen to Land wholly owned by the Parish Council?
- (d) Will District Council 'gift' or sell land to Town or Parish Councils for a nominal sum?

Response from the Chief Executive:

All existing contracts entered into by current councils will be automatically transferred to the new council, through a process known as contract novation. Local authorities often have long-term contracts for the provision of services (sometimes running to decades), and it is not the case that existing leases should be cancelled to provide stability – stability of continuance is the default position during any change, although clearly once the new councils are in existence, any contract negotiation at that point

onwards would be with the new council. Land wholly owned by the parish council will continue to be wholly owned by the parish council. Any decisions on assets made before the change order is implemented, will continue to be a decision of the pre-existing asset holder (the District Council), and policy decisions will be taken by councils in the normal way.

Currently Willand Parish Council cut all the roadside verges within the Parish and they receive a financial grant which covers a good proportion of the cost from Devon County Council.

Question 4: Will such arrangements continue?

Response from the Chief Executive:

There is no reason why this would not continue assuming multi-year agreements are in place. However, as outlined in a previous response, any negotiations with 'the highway authority' after the commencement date (expected on 1 April 2028) will be with the successor council as the county council will no longer exist.

Question 5: Is there any advice or indications which can be conveyed to Town and Parish Councils to assist with their planning for the practicalities of the future?

Response from the Chief Executive:

It is suggested that town and parish councils continue to liaise with their representatives in the Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC) and make the most of opportunities to engage in the process through the current survey and particularly through the statutory period of consultation, likely due springtime of 2026, where all viable proposals will be formally consulted upon. One inevitable outcome from this LGR process is that towns and parishes will be dealing with much larger councils than that of today. How the new councils support their towns and parishes to deliver at neighbourhood level and to thrive with, and for, their communities, will be a challenge that has to be met in order that residents see positive outcomes of this desired shift to larger, single-tier units of local government.

16 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (0:15:13)

There was an amendment to Item 5, Chair's Announcements, fourth bullet point where the words " , until the Unitary Authority was in existence." were added so that it read 'Tasks that now resided with the County Council would need to be appropriately shared between Unitary Authorities that were to be created – whilst still ensuring that the existing District Council carried out their duties to the best of their abilities, until the Unitary Authority was in existence.'

Following the addition of the amendment, the minutes of the last meeting held on Monday 9 June 2025 were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

Under Item 11 of the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2025 'Value for Money and Best Practice in Mid Devon Housing Modular Social Housing and Delivery

Report', Councillor G Czapiewski wanted it noted that he had made the point that using prisoner effort in the construction of Modern Methods of Construction in Modular Homes, added social value nationally and that it and other value adds, quantified in grants awarded, needed to be explicit and referred to directly in proposals to councillors as they aided in decision making.

17 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair had no announcements to make.

18 DECISIONS OF THE CABINET

The Committee **NOTED** that none of the decisions made by the Cabinet at its meetings on 17 June 2025 and 8 July 2025 had been called in.

19 ANNUAL CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2024/25 (0:20:56)

The Committee received and scrutinised the performance indicators and information received in the *Annual Corporate Performance Report 2024/25.

The following was highlighted:

- The report provided performance information for the 2024/25 financial year. The report and the accompanying appendices were structured according to the five themes in the Corporate Plan.
- Section 2 of the covering report provided performance analysis on a theme by theme basis, with the focus on the Corporate Plan performance indicators.
- Further information on performance against the Aims and Objectives detailed in the Corporate Plan was provided in Appendix 1 to 5.
- Appendix 6 contained the performance dashboards for quarter 4. These contained 100 measures highlighting how services were performing across the Council. Those indicators that were part of the Corporate Plan were highlighted in yellow text.
- The Performance Dashboards had also been reviewed by the relevant Policy Development Groups (PDGs) and the Planning Committee.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The Community Risk Register was under development and not yet published. The final draft had been completed and was circulating to the service specific leads to identify what mitigating actions the Council could take.
- The Council were represented by its Resilience Officer on a regional working group on Emergency Hubs which was led by the Devon Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Local Resilience Forum. The region were aiming to follow a consistent approach that met the needs of the responder agencies and provided the whole society resilience that was intended by creating an Emergency Hub. Locally, little had happened regarding Emergency Hubs as the Council were waiting for the common operating procedure before introducing the plan to communities.
- Householder Planning Applications, where the target was 70% of applications determined within 8 weeks in line with the Government threshold. A local

target had been considered but had not been changed for the consistency of reporting.

- Capital slippage 22%, target 0% - this was because two of the nine projects had slipped. One was the Building Management System at Phoenix House was currently being scoped and the other one was the Cullompton Relief Road, which was now well underway after securing funding.
- As part of the budget process, an aspirational £0 budget was set for the use of agency staff in Corporate Services. In 2024/25 it had been challenging to recruit in key areas such as Finance and Legal which therefore required agency staff to fill those critical roles costing £200k.
- In the drive towards Net Zero how much attention were the procurement team giving to the Council's own anti-slavery requirements? Should the spend be brought within the UK to ensure that slaves were not used in the supply chain? The Council focussed on modern slavery but the slavery outlined could be tackled through the Council's procurement processes. An answer would be provided to the Councillor asking the question following the meeting.
- The Homes Dashboard showed a figure for unoccupied and unfurnished empty homes across the district including those in the private sector to explain the implications it had for pressures on housing in the district and by extension the Council's homelessness team. The Homes PDG Performance Dashboard (HRA) had a measure entitled 'MDH Housing stock occupancy rate' which showed 97.5% and therefore 2.5% voids. – That meant that out of 3000 homes, approximately 75 were voids.
- National Non-Domestic Rates were otherwise known as Business Rates and 99.83% of those rates due were collected. The Economic Development team were aware of the empty properties that would attract a Business Rate. A large proportion of those properties were listed buildings where the owners received 100% relief and so there was no incentive (in the way of business rates) for the business to expand.
- The Council set its own target for the collection of business rates. Of the rates collected, 50% went to Central Government, 40% to the Council, 9% to the County Council and 1% to the Fire Service. However, the Council were a tariff authority, which meant that they had to pay further monies back to the Government which left the Council with a comparatively small amount of money.

Note: Report previously circulated.

20 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL REPORT (0:44:20)

The Committee received and **NOTED** a verbal Annual Report from the Leader of the Council.

The following was highlighted:

- Over the past two years (2023/24 and 2024/25) the Council had seen the satisfaction of their residents increase, up to 52% in the most recent survey - an increase of 11% on that recorded in 2023/24, and residents who felt well informed about the Council was up to 60% - an increase of 15%.

- The Council was trying new ways to work with their communities – such as through the ‘Let’s Talk Mid Devon’ platform, and working closer with their town and parish councils –through initiatives such as the State of the District debate, creating a new Cabinet position with responsibilities for Parish and Community Engagement, and developing community resilience plans in partnership with the towns and parishes.
- The Council had supported all 1,573 households who came to them experiencing homelessness in the past two years.
- Tenant satisfaction was strong and improving. Overall tenant satisfaction was up to 70%. 79% of tenants were satisfied that their homes were safe, and 72% of tenants were satisfied with the overall repairs service.
- The Council were building award winning, affordable, and energy efficient homes – helping to tackle the challenges of the housing crisis and the climate crisis
- The Council had advanced towards the top 5% of national performance for their recycling rate and reduction in residual tonnage (their 57.9% recycling rate put the Council 11th out of 197 District authorities and they were 9th for residual tonnage reduction). The Council was recognised nationally by The Office for Local Government for having one of the fastest increases in recycling rates nationally and were shortlisted for the National Local Government Chronical award for Environmental Services. Further options for additional recycling streams would be considered in the autumn following the successful Pots and Pans trial and the planned trial for recycling nappies and sanitary products.
- A £33.5 million funding package was signed, for the Cullompton Relief Road, in February 2025, with works due to start in 2026. This vital piece of long awaited infrastructure would be key to unlocking future development for the town. This, coupled with the recent announcement on the railway station, highlighted the hard work of Members and officers in bringing both of those initiatives forward.
- Over £1.8 million in funding had been secured over the past 2 years to support economic projects in the district, such as the delivery of the Tiverton Work Hub.
- Decision making on planning applications within Mid Devon continued to significantly exceed national targets, whilst the Council’s record of defending appeals against their decision making remained high reflecting sound justified decision making.
- The Council were 11th nationally in 2023/24, and up to 2nd in 2024/25 (99.83%) for the collection of Business Rates.
- The Council supported the vulnerable in the community, with around £550,000 paid out in food vouchers and energy vouchers via the Housing Support Fund.
- The Council’s Leisure service had undergone a full rebrand to Active Mid Devon. It had reduced its operating costs by circa £560,000, and they now had memberships at an all-time high, at around 7,000 members.
- The Council was supporting care leavers, carers, and low-income households with free and discounted memberships The efficiency of the Council’s leisure centres had been further improved (through winning further grant funding), whilst improving the interior of the sites too, with accessible toilets installed and major energy efficient upgrades.

- The Council continued to expand their network of EV chargers to support the transition to electric vehicles in the district, whilst also planting trees and increasing the biodiversity of the district.
- The Council had reduced agency spend, and seen staff turnover and sickness rates both decrease.
- All of this, and more, had been done whilst setting balanced budgets without the need to draw on reserves.
- The recent issues with travellers at Cullompton causing the extended leisure centre closure caused understandable concern. However, the Council were working closely with Devon County Council to find solutions and they were reviewing how they could protect their sports centres and car parks for the future.
- The Council was pressing the Department for Transport for clarity with regard to Junction 28 improvements.
- The Government's decision to raise the District's housing targets by over 60% had fundamentally changed the landscape for this and most local planning authorities in England. As a result, the Council was working on a new Local Plan to meet the new targets.
- There were ongoing discussions around the local government review, the Council continued to work collaboratively with other Councils across Devon toward the 4-5-1 proposal.
- The State of the District Debate was successful last year and this year's debate on Wednesday 17 September 2025 would focus on Local Government Reorganisation.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Whether funding would arrive to allow students to be able to study A-levels within the District rather than having to travel outside of it for their education.
- The three Councils across the County that were not supporting the 4-5-1 proposal, were Exeter City, Plymouth Unitary Authority and Devon County Council. Over the next few days Devon County Council were considering their position following the recent elections.

21 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND DEVOLUTION (0:58:27)**

The Committee received and **NOTED** an *update from the Chief Executive on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and Devolution.

The following was highlighted:

- The report set out the how the process started and the background context and the progress that had been made since the initial plan was submitted to the Government.
- The report covered some of the policy positions and the practicalities while a lot of the pieces were still in flux.
- Clarity was being sought by Town and Parish Councils regarding the impact of LGR.

- Whilst some councils were working collaboratively, some were not because this was a competitive process. This made partnership working more challenging than normal.
- The Government had made it clear that they would not revise the deadline and that it was their intent to make sure that LGR happened everywhere in England.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The final proposal had to be submitted by the end of November 2025. The Government would then reflect upon the responses it received and go out to consultation in spring 2026. The indicative timetable that had been received was that the Government would make a decision in summer/autumn 2026. In recent times the Government had suspended local elections, however, elections would need to be held in 2027 for the new shadow authority.
- Having a majority in favour of one proposal would hold minimal weight with the Government. However, it was expected that the majority would coalesce around the proposal that was most compelling and credible, showing how the proposed authorities would exist and deliver better outcomes in future, for the grouping that the league described.
- In relation to Towns and Parishes, would their model need to change? (Would they need more time commitment, allowances, payment and certified training?) There was likely to be an opportunity for those Town and Parish Councils who wanted to take on more and become more involved. All of the proposals were going to have to give some constructive thought as to how they engaged with the community at local level. Clearly, existing towns and parishes were going to be a really good way to start that conversation and continue it going forward.
- LGR had different phases; the current report explained what had happened and where the County was at present with a view to giving some reassurance and confidence that the Council were on track to achieve what the Council voted for, which was to get the proposal submitted. The role of scrutiny at the moment was to ask was the Council on track to get this done?
- The risk log at the moment was concentrating on, 'Were the Council going to get this done and submitted now?'
There was a wider risk log around capturing the risks of implementation, which was a secondary phase because the Council were having to make those changes incrementally.
- Collaborative Data Sharing had been difficult both in terms of the sheer quantity of information and data that councils held. Plymouth had agreed to host a data repository and the steering group had scoped out all the data streams that were going to be required from all 11 councils.
The league were in the process of populating the repository, there was a commitment to get all that data in place by the end of July.
- The Scrutiny Committee may wish to consider forming a working group, particularly as the project moved to the stage where those involved were talking about what implementation looked like. Scrutiny Committee would be there to scrutinise the process as the Council transitioned through the next phase.

- With regard to convergence of systems. The focus for day one would be, was it safe and legal? Was the Authority a legal entity and had the Authority stood up the things that needed to be stood up in advance to continue to maintain and operate safe functions on that day.
Having transitioned from one set of organisations to another, the process of convergence was one that came after vesting day and continued sometimes for years. IT systems were a challenge to converge, but there were plenty of reports that actually cultural convergence was just as challenging. The group were sighted on these things. What the group were doing at the moment was collaborating across councils. They would be utilising the funds that Government had made available and getting the proposal submitted. When it came to the implementation phase there would be a complete project team. By that point in time, the group of councils would no longer be competing against different proposals, the Secretary of State and Government would have made a decision. Therefore the task then, would be to come together as the 11 Councils and make it happen.
- **Learning from others' past experiences of LGR:** Firstly, the group were utilising national case studies as developed by their professional groupings, the District Council's network, had helped on a few areas of best practice. The Local Government Association were hosting a local government reorganisation information and best practise repository which detailed a lot of experiences to learn from.
- **There was** the clear political intent of this government to see LGR through.
- With regard to the size and scale of the proposed Unitary Authorities, there were ways of mitigating the geographical dispersal of an area by the use of area boards in a large unitary. At present, Councillors were required to be present to vote and the commuting time could well be over three hours, was that the best use of Councillor's time? The 4-5-1 proposal had been voted on at Full Council and it was not envisaged to take that decision back to Full Council again. Had thought been given to the allowance of remote attendance being a condition for the participation of Councillors? Nearly every area in the country had pushed back against the Government saying that they were a special case. Ultimately the decision as to the make-up of the new Authority would be a decision for the Secretary of State. The longer travel times were of concern to Councillors and members of the public who had expressed concerns around the accessibility of democracy. No consideration had been given at present to where the various Council functions would be based. All proposals would need to demonstrate how they could be responsive to local community need. There was no one perfect way to do that, but one could pretty much guarantee that all proposals would be trying to find ways to demonstrate that the advantages of economies of scale could be balanced off with local provision in some way, shape or form, whether that was through; community boards, area committees or clustering of parish councils into neighbourhood areas.
- A new Unitary Authority was unlikely to take all of the services that were currently provided by some of the districts, especially a lot of the discretionary services.

- The distance to travel would probably necessitate the new Authority having to have its meetings in the day time which would then exclude a significant number of people putting themselves forward to be Councillors.
- LGR was likely to take away a lot of representation from our community.
- A much smaller Unitary Authority, particularly in an area of rural deprivation, was likely to run into financial difficulties.
- There was funding made available from Central Government of £7.6million to support councils across England in developing these proposals, however, that money was to be divided between 21 areas, each with a number of districts alongside the County Council and with some smaller Unitaries in that space. In Devon there were 11 Councils which would split the amount allocated to Devon equally which meant that Mid Devon would receive £34,000 to develop the proposals. When reports were needed, the local councils would work together to commission those reports in order to achieve economies of scale and save costs. It was the intention of the Chief Executive and the Leader that only the funds made available from Central Government be used for this exercise. The £34,000 received from Central Government was just for this phase to support the production of the proposals to get submitted by 28 November 2025.

The costs of implementation were of a completely different order of magnitude. The firm expectation was that councils would have to fund all of the transition themselves.

- The role of the local Members of Parliament was to use their 'soft power' and influence, and speak in support of the local councils when questioned.
- Following the move to Unitary authorities would more money and resources be available for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision? It would be the task of the current councils to make sure that the successor councils were safe and legal on day one. Obviously there were services that were delivered in a certain way at the moment and some of those services were delivered really well, while some of them were delivered in ways that could be improved. All such proposals that would come forward would no doubt be seeking to convince Government that if they agreed to that proposal, that, that would be the way to improve local services.

Note: *Update previously circulated.

22 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee had before it and **NOTED** the *Forward Plan and the *Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

The changes to the work programme for the meetings in September were explained to the Committee.

Two work proposals were considered:

- National Planning Policy Framework and the Council's 5 Year Housing Plan was included in the work plan for after the summer.
- Extending / Enriching Apprenticeship Opportunities at the Council would be included in the Establishment Report that would be coming to the Scrutiny Committee on 8 September 2025.

Note: *Forward Plan and the *Scrutiny Committee Work Programme were previously circulated.

(The meeting ended at 7.03 pm)

CHAIR