

MINUTES of a MEETING of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on 8 September 2025 at 5.00 pm

**Present
Councillors**

L G J Kennedy (Chair)
G Westcott (Vice-Chair), A Cuddy, G
Czapiewski, M Farrell, B Holdman, L Knight,
J Poynton and R Roberts

**Apologies
Councillors**

C Adcock, D Broom, E Buczkowski and C Harrower

**Also Present
Officers:**

Maria De Leburne (Director of Legal, People &
Governance (Monitoring Officer)), Matthew Page (Head of
People, Performance & Waste, Paul Deal (Head of
Finance, Property and Climate Resilience), James Hamblin
(Operations Manager for People Services), Paul Wilson
(Specialist Lead for Community Safety & Safeguarding)
and David Parker (Democratic Services & Policy Research
Officer)

**Councillors
Online**

G Duchesne, J Lock, L Taylor, J Wright and D Wulff

Officer Online

Simon Newcombe (Head of Housing and Health)

23 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (00:05:38)

Apologies were received from Councillors: C Adcock, D Broom who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman, Cllr E Buczkowski and Cllr C Harrower.

24 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT (00:06:10)

No declarations were declared under this item.

25 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (00:06:27)

P ELSTONE

Regarding Agenda Item 8: Establishment Report

Question 1: My point of reference is Section 4.0 Establishment - Table 2. A table which shows the staff numbers for this Council and associated payroll plus pension cost over the period 2021 to 2025.

It is noted that over the period the total number people employed increased from 728 to 782, an increase of 7%. That the total Taxable Gross Pay rose from £12.197 million to £14.916 million, a payroll increase of 22%. Yet the employer's pension payments increased from £1.938 million to £2.749 million. A massive increase of 41%.

Please fully explain why there is such a massive increase in pension costs. Pension cost which are greatly out of step with the staff and payroll increases.

Question 2: What is the current annual cost of the pension scheme administration fees?

Question 3: Where can details of this Council's pension fund financial status be found for public viewing?

Regarding Agenda Item 11 - Work Program

Question 4: At the Cabinet meeting of the 2 September 2025, I asked the following question related to the Freedom of Information Policy:-

"Will this Cabinet request that Scrutiny Committee implement a full review into how the Freedom of Information (FOI) System is really functioning especially as Members of this Council are now having their integrity and reputation challenged when their responses to public questions are found to be incorrect?"

Additionally, I provided an example of both exceptional delays being experienced in receiving answers to FOI request and a lack of integrity in the answers received.

Another member of the public provided examples of similar FOI issues at the same meeting.

The response from the Council Leader was totally dismissive even making an incorrect statement about the three other Council's FOI performance without even knowing who they were and without any factual evidence to support.

Most disturbingly, the Council Leader was publicly dismissive of Information Commissioner Judgements against this Council in connection with its Freedom of Information system failings.

Will Scrutiny Committee implement a full review into why the Freedom of Information System is failing to properly function in this Council? Especially so when irrefutable evidence that exist, yes irrefutable evidence, to show that there are quite serious integrity and reputational issues resulting?

The Chair explained that with regard to the last question this item would be on the agenda at the next meeting on 29 September 2025. All other questions would be answered, in writing, within ten working days.

Supplemental Question:

Can you confirm that's this is relating to how the Freedom of Information system is truly functioning or was that another review?

26 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (00:10:55)

The minutes of the last meeting held on 14 July 2025 were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

27 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00:11:25)

The Chair made the following announcements:-

- He thanked Cllr Sue Robinson, his predecessor who due to a personal matter could not give this Committee its full time and attention and had immediately stood down. He wished to thank her and wished her well for the future.
- With regard to Local Government Reorganisation – he had been a Director of Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC). He had spoken to the Monitoring Officer who had confirmed that it would put him in a difficult position moving forwards should he remain a Director as well as Chair of this Committee. He had therefore stepped down as Director of DALC.

28 DECISIONS OF THE CABINET (00:13:01)

The Committee **NOTED** that none of the decisions made by the Cabinet on 2 September had been called in.

29 WHISTLEBLOWING - 6 MONTH UPDATE (00:13:18)

The Committee **NOTED** a verbal report from the Head of People Performance and Waste with an update on whistleblowing complaints in the past 6 months.

The following was highlighted:-

- The Council had received a complaint which had an element of whistleblowing in it. The complaint had been externally and independently investigated, with none of the allegations being upheld.
- There had been no other whistleblowing allegations.

30 ESTABLISHMENT REPORT (00:14:24)

The Committee had before it and **NOTED** a *report from Head of People, Performance and Waste.

The following was highlighted in the report:

- The six month update report complemented the Annual Establishment Report and Pay Policy which was presented to Cabinet each February.
- Since the last report in February – 2024/2025 had seen some of the best performances for turnover, sickness and agency spend in recent years.
- The data for 2025/2026 was running very close to those same figures with a further update being presented in February 2026.
- A staff survey would be carried out in early 2026 and would include questions tailored to meet the needs of the Council's workforce with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) on the horizon and the changes in the way some services were delivered.
- Staff were regularly updated through staff briefings, internal communications on the progress of LGR although details at the moment were limited.
- The 2025/2026 pay award had been signed off at the start of August – this was the earliest it had been concluded in many years.
- The Local Government Association (LGA) were keen to explore a three year settlement for the years 2026/2027, 2027/2028 and 2028/2029.

The Operations Manager for People Services further explained the following:

- 2024/2025 saw the lowest sickness absence levels since the pandemic with 7.35 days per full time equivalent (FTE) this was a significant reduction from the 10.45 days seen in 2023/2024.
- Staff turnover in 2024/2025 finished at 16.3%, the lowest since the pandemic.
- Agency spending during 2024/2025 was lower compared to the previous financial year.
- The Council continued to support apprentices. There were currently 16 apprentices across all Council services.
- Reviewing the data from the year ending 2024 showed that 90% of the Council's apprentices became employees.
- Work was being undertaken to consider improvements for work experience pupils in 2026.
- Staff welcomed the six monthly checks offered by colleagues in Active Mid Devon and this would continue.
- Communications would continue with staff regarding LGR.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Whether there would be an increase in turnover as the Council moved forwards with LGR and was anything in place to deal with that. It was explained that the exit interview data did not show so far LGR as reason for people to leave. This may change over the next 2 years as staff consider their options. This would be closely monitored.
- The importance of offering work experience placements.
- The proportion of staff interviewed upon exit. It was explained that an exit interview was offered to all staff. In the last three months there had been several months where 100% of exit interviews had taken place. This was currently being reviewed in terms of the process and content of the interview to reduce the possibility of exit interviews reducing in the future.
- How LGR was affecting the recruitment process. It was explained that based on data there had not been a drop in applications. Some roles were more

difficult to recruit to and it was not always possible to find the skill or knowledge in-house.

- How to reduce staff sickness absences further. It was explained that every absence was treated on a case-by-case basis.
- The factors of those increases in the number of employees. It was explained that the figures were across the whole of the year. The increase in total Taxable Gross Pay, national insurance and pension contributions. This needed to be investigated further. Whether information could be shared from other authorities which could be compared as a guide to assessing statistics. At the moment that information is/may not be available and may not be in the public domain.
- The work and commitment from officers and managers across the Council in reducing sickness absence.
- Whether officers were aware of expected agency fee expenditure.

Note: *report previously circulated.

31 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND DEVOLUTION (00:39:42)

The Chair explained that if Members had any specific points they wished to raise those would be captured in the minutes and would be addressed at the next Scrutiny Committee on 29 September 2025.

Discussion took place regarding:-

- Keeping members of the public informed as there were rumours that there would be one Unitary Authority across Devon. To prevent rumours it was important to keep everyone informed.
- There did not appear to be any schedules or timings. Prior to decisions being made would proposals and recommendations come before the Scrutiny Committee prior to submitting them to the Government?
- How would the transition take form - would this be a Shadow Organisation and how anticipated as part of the detail?
- The demands on driving time for meetings that may be spread across Devon would not allow sufficient time for Councillors to fulfil their roles.
- The implications of the amount of time for members as they would spend more time traveling.
- The difficulties of population being made clear to the authorities, for areas which had dispersed rural settlements.

32 COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP REPORT (00:46:15)

The Committee had before it and **NOTED** a *report from the Head of Housing and Health.

The Committee were introduced to Paul Wilson, Specialist Lead for Community Safety and Safeguarding.

The following was highlighted in the report:

- The Annual Report ensured that the Scrutiny Committee had an oversight of the East and Mid Devon Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and had an opportunity to review the activities of the Partnership during 2024/2025 and to look ahead at the priorities and pressures this year and beyond.
- Following a review by the statutory partnership with the CSP the priorities had been updated for this year onwards and the CSP continued to be a specified authority under the Statutory Serious Violence Duty which was introduced in 2023.
- There had been ongoing pressures around CSP's responsibilities in terms of the statutory Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR).
- There were a number of national developments in the pipeline as set out within the report.
- There was a strong emphasis on the work towards anti-social behaviour.
- It had been recognised within the Devon Serious Violence Strategy that anti-social behaviour (ASB) was tackled early and that it had been a priority during 2024/2025. This had been reflected through the increased use of ASB powers, the introduction of New Youth, antisocial behaviour intervention panels and the recent work in Tiverton with marshals in the town centre.
- The CSP also worked with the Community Alcohol Partnership and the Devon wide Let's Talk Programme, which offered a myriad of sessions supporting children and parents around issues such as online exploitation, serious violence and knife crime.
- The crime levels within mid Devon remained low and well below the national average. However ASB was an issue that would continue to be addressed.
- New priorities for the CSP would focus on youth, ASB including drinking, drugs and nuisance behaviour and how that related to ASB in the town centres, domestic abuse, sexual violence, harmful sexual behaviour and child exploitation.
- Despite the lack of funding for the CSP from the Government, the Police and the Crime Commissioner there was still an ongoing duty to provide complex DHRs that were managed at a county level.
- Across Devon there was a rising pressure to deliver more and more DHRs which would create funding pressures. This was being reviewed.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- How the CSP were proactively dealing with ASB. It was explained that there had been a very strong emphasis on ASB with increased use of Community Protection Notices and Community Protection Warning powers along with training for Housing and Public Health Council staff.
- Would drug rehabilitation be considered as this was on an ongoing problem? It was explained that yes, there were commission services that were commissioned at a County level.

- Does the Council have sufficient budget for street marshals and was this utilised. It was explained that the level of patrols had been conducted was defined by the Home Office.
- Clarification around the increase in domestic violence.
- Shoplifting in and around the Tiverton area.
- The information that was in the public domain about ASB and the reporting arrangements.
- Future focus of priority three in the new list of priorities, domestic abuse, sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour. What was the year of this increase?

Note: *report previously circulated.

33 **WORK PROGRAMME (01:32:34)**

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:

- Street Marshals and ASB Reporting- it was **AGREED** this proposal form would be forwarded to the Head of Housing and Health.
- MMC Self Builds- In terms of their build approach as a Council. It was **AGREED** this proposal form would be sent directly to the Director of Place and Planning Policy Advisory Group.

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

(The meeting ended at 6.43 pm)

CHAIR