

Scrutiny Annual Report

18 April 2016

In reviewing the last year how would we recognise successful scrutiny?

- Has it influenced outcomes through policy development review, performance review and by internal and external challenge?
- Has it influenced process through informed debate, Member involvement and public involvement?
- Has it implemented the four principles of good scrutiny: - providing a critical friend challenge to the Cabinet as well as external agencies and holding the Executive to account?
- Reflected the voice and concerns of the public?
- Taken the lead on behalf of the public?

This represents a challenging agenda for a committee which meets but monthly and whilst well supported by our Member Services colleague, Julia Stuckey, and the professional contribution of officers, is unable to call upon the resources of a dedicated Scrutiny Officer. Regrettably a proposal to deploy an intern from Exeter University failed to attract any interest. Much therefore depends on the enthusiasm and integrity of Scrutiny Committee Members and its effectiveness on their capacity to act in a non-party political way. It is therefore encouraging to report that the Committee made determined strides to achieve the above agenda and had a full and busy year.

A noticeable feature is the respect which Members of the Cabinet demonstrate when they are held to account on their portfolio and the vigour with which they are challenged by Members – similarly replicated when officers are challenged. However it is important that such dialogue is conducted with mutual respect and understanding of different roles.

Apart from these regular interrogation of members of the Cabinet on the effective performance of their portfolios, the Committee has directed attention to the following:

- Staff survey outcomes to assess the morale and well being of staff, coupled with staff sickness
- Conservation and Listed Building issues, particularly in respect of Cullompton
- Progress towards Digital Transformation to generate efficiencies in working methods and a concern that there should be a concomitant recognition of the needs of those members of the public unfamiliar with digital methods. There was also regard for its impact on Town and Parish Councils and the technical and financial support available to them.

- An update on Economic Development , a key objective of the Council – an opportunity to commend the raised profile of MDDC in encouraging business development of Tiverton Town Centre and the District as a whole and raising the profile across the South West
- A timely presentation on Safeguarding of Children and vulnerable adults which indicated the active concerns of MDDC but identified an absence of effective coordination machinery countrywide.
- Planning issues were uppermost on Members minds representing public concern, particularly the impact on local communities of Anaerobic Digesters. A request is to be made to the Environment Agency for MDDC to lead into the environmental permit regime and that it should take a lead in the coordination of all the agencies involved including the Environmental Health Service, Devon County Council, Public Health England and the Driver Vehicle Standards Agency. The Scope of important planning conditions to be reviewed to develop best practice for future application. There was also a call for a report regarding the enforcement Services delays in enforcement and plans to rectify this.
- A call for the update of the Town and Parish Charter and circulation to all Members.
- Links with local business and the new role of Tiverton Town Centre Manager to identify and address business needs and plans for the future. Regular information on the Pannier Market to be provided.
- Reassurance was sought on the implementation of RIPA (Regulations of Investigatory Powers Act) with MDDC and ongoing reassurance of its use, however now deployed exceptionally and under magistrate direction.
- Concern for people in low paid employment or self-employed with no hope of buying their own home and the diminishing quantity of social housing was raised with the Minister responsible to little effect unfortunately. A second letter has been sent at the Committees request.

External Representations

The Committee invited and subsequently interrogated important representatives in the public sector who contribute to the community in Mid Devon.

- We welcomed both MP's – a first – in Neil Parish and Mel Stride who responded to members questions previously submitted and also to subsequent questions. A number of issues raised were taken back and answers sought e.g. Superfast Broadband.
- The Committee received an extensive report from the Police and Crime Commissioner, Tony Hogg, on the day prior to his appearance at the House of Commons to challenge the Police funding mechanism. With declining finance he explained the pressure facing the force including growing issues

such as mental health and domestic violence, child sexual exploitation, fraud and drugs. He also floated the concept of a referendum to address the funding issue as an alternative to the potential loss of 12-1300 jobs.

- The Committee were also able to question John Finn Managing Director of the Eastern Division of the Local Clinical Commissioning Group, a discussion once again dominated by resources or the absence thereof, but importantly he offered to bring subsequent sessions all the partners engaged in the wellbeing of the community – Public Health, NHS and Social Care – as a recognition that good involves a multi-agency approach.

Task and Finish Group

The investigatory work of Scrutiny is often addressed via a task and finish groups and 2 groups have been established to examine key aspects of MDDC's business planning, namely reviewing efficiencies and partnership working. I appreciate the extra time that Members donate to this activity, the report of the former to be published shortly.

Call-in

Call in is in one sense the 'nuclear button' which should only be used rarely and when the Executive is out of line with expected behaviour and needs to be hauled back from an ill-conceived action. It has been used twice this year – to challenge the Premier Inn proposed adaption to the multi-story car park which had not been flagged up as a key decision – a challenge not supported by the Committee. Secondly, concerns that car park charges in long stay car parks were contrary to the economic development priority of the Corporate Plan which the committee supported but fell at the Cabinet meeting. Although neither 'call in' succeeded within its own terms its potential use serves as a reminder that Scrutiny can both work with and equally hold the executive to account – part of the checks and balances of the Constitution.

In conclusion I hope the above demonstrates the efforts made by the Scrutiny Committee to adhere to the 4 principles and to achieve value to the community. Its agenda is determined by Members bringing forward issues of interest and concern from their contact with the public. I would like to thank Members of the Committee for their commitment, officers for their professionalism and especially Julia Stuckey who works tirelessly to keep the process on track.

Frank Rosamond
Chairman