

Charter for Member Development Assessment Report



Charter Type Name of Authority

Address of Authority Postcode

Contact Name Email Address

Date of Assessment Visit Start Time Finish Time

Name of Assessor 1 Organisation Position

Name of Assessor 2 Organisation Position

Name of Assessor 3 Organisation Position

Date of Formal Commitment

The Assessors are satisfied the evidence is: Valid Authentic Current Sufficient

Has Charter status been awarded? Yes Valid until: No Re-assess by:

Signature (at least one of the visiting Assessors should sign) Date

Representatives met during the Assessment visit

Name	Role
Cllr Clive Eginton	Leader
Stephen Walford	Chief Executive
Sally Gabriel	Principal MSO
Cllr Peter Heal	Chair of CDG

Name	Role
Cllr Bob Evans	Councillor
Cllr Frank Letch	Councillor
Cllr Mrs Elizabeth Slade	Councillor

Summary Comments

Areas of Good Practice (particularly where there is evidence of a sustainable approach, embedded activities and innovative practice)

The same Assessment Team visited as had undertaken the 2014 reassessment, the team were impressed by the progress they found in the three years since their last visit. It seemed clear that the importance of ongoing Member Development was well embedded within the organisation and there was a strong commitment to this by both Councillors and Officers. The relationship between Councillors and officers seemed to have strengthened, from a good base, and there was clear commitment to moving the organisation forward. The Leader described Mid Devon District Council as no longer them and us but “one team working together”. We also heard from Councillors that the new Chief Executive was more than happy to meet with Councillors and offer them support.

Once again we found a cross-party commitment to Member Development and no indications that budgetary pressures had reduced the ability to access development. A real strength of the Council is the take-up of Personal Development interviews by Councillors – with 30 members revisiting their PDPs last year (71%).

There was evidence of evaluation taking place and comments from Members being reflected in changed practice. One good example was the in-house session on Planning provided by officers which Councillors told us was excellent in helping them to work with their Parishes and being able to explain the importance of following the planning rules and having well founded decision making.

In the previous assessment report the team had been impressed by the Policy Development Groups and how they were being used to shape and develop policy ideas for the Cabinet and how this was helping with Councillor engagement and development of skills in the wider Council, we remain impressed by this approach.

A new initiative that we were also impressed by was the first attempt to deliver a development session via video conferencing so that one group of Councillors could be in Tiverton and the other in Crediton (or in future wherever is deemed appropriate). This approach had, as would be expected with technology, some teething problems but overall had worked well and we would encourage Mid Devon to persevere with this approach to delivering.

We also heard very positive examples of officers and Councillors developing informally together through the Ward Walks programme. This had helped develop links with officers but also provided the opportunity to discuss a range of issues affecting the Ward at an early stage. It was seen as a positive way of developing in a more informal way.

Since our last visit Mid Devon has started to grasp the social media “challenge”, in the run up to the assessment we had noticed how the Council was using Twitter more effectively to engage with its community and was encouraging democratic engagement through promoting voter registration. There are specific Councillor pages on Facebook and the web. We picked up that Twitter use was up by 243% and Facebook up by 184% last year (according to the Chief Executive’s twitter account).

We thought the Member Services team taking on responsibility for parish liaison could be a really positive step forward in helping to offer parishes access to appropriate development opportunities and potentially delivering a better relationship and better outcomes between the two tiers within the district. Joint training with parishes and others seems to have been pursued as a good way forward at a time of tight budgets, we also welcomed the recognition that sometimes training outside the Devon “patch” could be useful in networking and learning from others – whether it be events in London or elsewhere in the South West.

Overall we were impressed by Mid Devon’s strong commitment to ensuring their Councillors are well supported and are able to improve their skills. We felt the Council was very close to the Member Charter Plus Standard.

Specific Action Points (to be completed where Charter status has not been approved at the initial visit)

Not applicable

Development Advice

There are no major development areas but some areas that Mid Devon may want to consider for further improvement have been identified by the assessment team, including:

1. The Council recognises the need to revitalise the Member Buddying scheme which appears not to have been effective after the last election (the officer buddy scheme in comparison seems to have worked well)
2. The PDGs appear to be working well but the team felt there might be a need for some focussed development support to Councillors on refining their challenge and strategic thinking skills.
3. The assessment team found it difficult to find clarity about how the PDGs, Scrutiny Committees and other committees fitted together – there seems to be a lot of committees to support and there may be a good rationale for the existence of all these but the team did not hear this articulated.
4. In terms of preparation for achieving Charter +, the assessment team would advise Mid Devon to focus on areas such as:
 - How social media might be used to reach under-represented groups to become Councillors (1.2)
 - Using personal development discussions to identify development appropriate to leaders, cabinet members and chairs and succession planning to develop the next generation of leaders (2.4)
 - Methods for Councillor profiling and gathering statistical evidence (and benchmarking against national Councillor census) such as (1.3):
 - i. Average length of Councillor service
 - ii. Average number of committees or sub-committees participated in
 - iii. %age of members who are on other public bodies such as parish/town councils, another local authority, fire authority, police & crime panel, national park authority etc
 - iv. %age of Councillors engaging in one or more formal training opportunity
 - v. %age of Councillors by gender, ethnicity, long-term health or disability, with caring responsibilities
 - vi. %age retired/full-time employment/self-employed/part-time
 - vii. Average age and %age under 45 and over 70

Standards

Commitment to Councillor development		
1.1	Political and managerial leadership is committed to the development of Councillors	Yes
1.2	The council actively encourages citizenship and publicises the role of councillors as community leaders as part of promoting local democracy so as to encourage underrepresented groups to become a councillor	Yes
1.3	The council is committed to ensuring equal access to learning and development for all councillors	Yes
1.4	The council has a designated budget for councillor development which is adequate to meet priority development needs	Yes
1.5	Designated officer/s of the council have responsibility for coordinating councillor development	Yes

Comments

The team had no doubt about the clear commitment to ongoing development and support for Councillors and that there was evidence of a sufficient budget to enable access to learning and development by all. The assessment team were given strong messages about the Councillors leading the strategy *"At the end of the day it has to be member-led as we have to vote for the budget to pay for it"*.

We saw the signed commitment to being reaccredited as a Charter authority. We also saw evidence of the cross party Councillor Development Group meeting regularly.

There was evidence of the council encouraging engagement and promoting democracy – on Twitter they have been active in promoting the campaign on voting in the forthcoming County Council elections. We also noted their support for "Be a Councillor" and no doubt they will be promoting this more vigorously closer to the next district elections.

As noted above we were impressed that the Council had responded to concerns from some Councillors about the difficulty of attending training and as a result have piloted a two-site delivery approach for Dementia training which had been very well received. Councillors stated this was *"very good and we need to do more of it"*. We would encourage further development of this and also continued thought to be given to how best to meet individual Councillor needs, particularly thinking about any new intake following the next election.

The officer team supporting Councillor development continues to be highly regarded by Members. There appears to have been a substantial improvement across the board in terms of the organisation working as *"one team"* as mentioned above and Councillors feeling able to raise issues and *"be listened to by officers – we can now have a good discussion"*. Councillors stated they have a *"close working relationship with officers"* and *"we are very much a team working together"*. The member support team comes in for particular praise by Councillors with comments including *"Member services are excellent"* *"nothing is ever too much trouble"* (interestingly a comment we heard last time round as well).

Strategic approach to Councillor development		
2.1	The council has a councillor development strategy in place	Yes
2.2	The council has a structured process for regularly assessing councillors' individual learning and development needs based on focused objectives	Yes
2.3	The various councillor roles are clearly defined and outline how they contribute to the achievement of community, political and council objectives	Yes
2.4	The council has a structured process for assessing current and future leadership and executive team development needs	Yes
2.5	There is a corporate councillor learning and development plan in place	Yes

Comments

We were presented with evidence of a strategy being in place for Councillor development. In particular we heard about the plans to review the previous induction process and make further improvements. We heard from a new Councillor about the positive experience of induction and we heard from another Councillor who was in their second term and had dipped into the most recent one and found it much improved. One Councillor commented *"I have every confidence that the organisation is moving forward to an even better induction process"*. As noted above we would recommend a revitalisation of the buddying programme in time for the next induction.

The take up of one-to-one development plan discussions is one of the really positive examples of the commitment to Councillor Development. One of the Councillors we interviewed reported her experience of the discussions as being really positive and covering any ground that seemed appropriate – as a result the Councillor had attended a couple of courses which had been really helpful. They had felt encouraged to develop and *"feel very supported"* to do their job. Some of the Councillors we interviewed had not undertaken the PDP refresher process – we didn't see this as a particular problem although there felt to be an element of *"I have done the job for a while so know what needs doing"* - care needs to be taken that all Councillors are encouraged to keep learning and developing new skills given the constant changing local government environment.

The team was also impressed by the fact that the role of Councillors is set out within the constitution, where it is made clear that Councillors not only had a role representing their Ward but also have to work to represent the interests of the whole community and wider council.

Whilst there was a clear corporate commitment to development we did have some remaining uncertainty about the strategic linkages between corporate priorities and member development and how strategically decisions would be made on councillor development spend if there were increased budget pressures.

Learning and development is effective in building capacity		
3.1	Investment in learning and development is regularly evaluated in terms of the cost benefit and impact	Yes
3.2	Learning is shared with other councillors and where appropriate, with officers and stakeholders to encourage capacity building in the council and a learning organisation culture	Yes
3.3	The council demonstrates a commitment to an effective councillor learning and development programme by implementing improvements to learning and development activities as they are identified	Yes

Comments

There was evidence of a continuing improvement in the way that development is evaluated. There was good evidence of Councillors being asked for their views after an event to assess potential improvements and also evidence of officers asking for ideas about how to increase engagement. We heard of an example with Planning training where this had helped a Councillor in terms of engaging and supporting a Parish Council discussion and, in his view, producing better outcomes as a result.

Some examples of training with a positive outcome on individuals were described such as: Public Speaking, Speech Writing, Personal Safety, Speedreading and 21st Century Councillor event.

The weekly information sheet for Members WIS continues to be seen as a really useful publication in terms of sharing information. We also heard from Councillors how they share information from events they attended outside Mid Devon. This was an area which can be further developed.

We heard about the member services team now supporting work with parishes and we agree that this could be an excellent opportunity to build shared capacity. There was also evidence of sharing learning with other partners and Councillors visiting other authorities to learn from innovations elsewhere.