

West Devon Hub Committee



West Devon
Borough
Council

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| Title: | Agenda |
| Date: | Tuesday, 11th June, 2024 |
| Time: | 2.00 pm |
| Venue: | Chamber - Kilworthy Park |
| Full Members: | <p style="text-align: center;">Chairman Cllr Ewings Vice Chairman Cllr Renders</p> <p><i>Members:</i> Cllr Bridgewater Cllr Mann Cllr Edmonds Cllr Moody Cllr Elliott Cllr Mott Cllr Jory</p> |
| Interests – Declaration and Restriction on Participation: | Members are reminded of their responsibility to declare any disclosable pecuniary interest not entered in the Authority's register or local non pecuniary interest which they have in any item of business on the agenda (subject to the exception for sensitive information) and to leave the meeting prior to discussion and voting on an item in which they have a disclosable pecuniary interest. |
| Committee administrator: | Democratic.Services@swdevon.gov.uk |

| | |
|--|----------------|
| 1. Apologies for absence | |
| 2. Declarations of Interest | |
| In accordance with the Code of Conduct, Members are invited to declare any Disclosable Pecuniary Interests, Other Registerable Interests and Non-Registerable Interests including the nature and extent of such interests they may have in any items to be considered at this meeting; | |
| 3. Items Requiring Urgent Attention | |
| To consider those items which, in the opinion of the Chairman, should be considered by the Meeting as matters of urgency (if any) | |
| 4. Confirmation of Minutes | 1 - 4 |
| Minutes of meeting held 9 April 2024; | |
| 5. Public Questions | |
| a period of up to 15 minutes is available to deal with issues raised by the public; | |
| 6. Hub Committee Forward Plan | 5 - 14 |
| 7. Corporate Peer Challenge 2024 | 15 - 46 |
| 8. Productivity Plan | 47 - 60 |
| 9. Cost of Living Crisis: Plans for Household Support Fund Allocation (1 April to 30 September 2024) and 12 Month Review of the Revenues and Benefits Service | 61 - 72 |
| 10. Housing - Parish Profiles | 73 - 78 |
| 11. Q3 and Q4 2023/24 Write Off Report | 79 - 98 |

Agenda Item 4

At a Meeting of the **HUB COMMITTEE** held in the **Council Chamber, Kilworthy Park, Tavistock** on **TUESDAY** the **9th** day of **April 2024** at **2.00 pm**.

Members in attendance:

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| * Cllr A Bridgewater | * Cllr T Leech |
| * Cllr L Daniel | ∅ Cllr J Moody (attended via Teams) |
| * Cllr C Edmonds | * Cllr C Mott |
| * Cllr M Ewings (Leader) | * Cllr M Renders (Deputy Leader) |
| * Cllr N Jory | |

Other Member(s) also in attendance in a non-voting capacity:

Cllrs Cunningham; Dexter; Johnson and West

Officers in attendance

Chief Executive; Director – Place & Enterprise; Director - Governance and Assurance; Section 151 Officer; Monitoring Officer; Assistant Director – Strategy; Head of Housing; Community Development Manager; Principal Community Services Officer; Interim Head of Community Services; Locality Engagement Officers; and Specialist - Democratic Services;

***HC 68/23 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for absence had been received from Cllr Moody, who joined the meeting online in a non-voting capacity.

***HC 69/23 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be discussed but there were none made.

***HC 70/23 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Hub Committee meeting held on 5 March 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

***HC 71/23 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

It was noted that no Public Questions had been received in accordance with the Hub Committee Procedure Rules.

***HC 72/23 HUB COMMITTEE FORWARD PLAN**

Members were presented with the latest version of the Hub Committee Forward Plan that set out items on the agenda for Hub Committee meetings for the next four months and the contents were duly noted.

***HC 73/23 THE WEST DEVON HOUSING OFFER**

The Hub Committee considered a report that sought approval for the implementation of a new housing initiative to support the delivery of community housing development in the Borough, known as the “West Devon Housing Offer”.

The report also set out the progress made on the Princetown site jointly owned by the Council and DNPA.

During the ensuing debate, reference was made to:

- a) Setting up of Community Land Trusts was raised. The Head of Housing said the setting up of these community led trusts would be supported and money would be available, and the report set out how this can be achieved.
- b) Self builds would not be discounted at this stage and the Head of Housing suggested anyone interested should speak to the Council.
- c) The Head of Housing hoped that the Housing Offer would work with Neighbour Plans to achieve affordable housing where it was needed.
- d) The housing need survey and Parish profiles had identified specific areas of need. A Council owned brown field site in the north of the area was queried as a potential site but other options were being looked at for that.
- e) It was noted that any scheme would stop at any point where it wasn't deemed viable.

- x) a Member sought clarity regarding recommendation 4 which, as worded, implied that there were additional affordable housing Schemes approved by DNPA, when only the Princetown scheme had in fact received approval. As a result, an amendment to the recommendation was proposed and seconded such that the Hub Committee:

"4. Agrees to utilise a grant payment from DNPA s106 receipts of £173,000 for the purpose of affordable housing delivery in Princetown"

It was then:

RESOLVED

- 1. that the West Devon Housing Offer be launched to communities to support affordable housing delivery;
- 2. that the initial budget of £50,000 agreed as part of The Council Plan to fund the West Devon Housing Offer be noted;
- 3. that the update and progress on the Princetown scheme at Moorland View be noted; and
- 4. that a grant payment from DNPA s106 receipts of £173,000 be utilised for the purpose of affordable housing delivery in Princetown.

***HC 74/23 WORKING WITH OUR COMMUNITIES – OUR FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Members considered a report that set out the ways in which the Council intended to support community development across West Devon.

In discussion, the following points were raised:

- a) The Parish Links meetings would be re-established. All Members would be encouraged to get the message out to their Town and Parishes. Community Development cuts across all portfolio areas.
- b) Benefit on the economy of communities with arts and culture.
- c) The hard work of staff was recognised to bring the Community Development Team together.
- d) Advisory Group to look at areas where there is a lack of councillors and support within a parish.

It was then:

RESOLVED

1. that the Community Development Framework as set out in Appendix A of the presented report, be endorsed; and
2. that the establishment of a new Community Development Team be noted

***HC 75/23 LONG STAY PAY & DISPLAY CHARGES CONSULTATION REVIEW**

Consideration was given to a report that provided Members with an update on the recently held consultation regarding a series of proposed amendments to the West Devon Borough Council Off Street Parking Places Order 2022. The report also sought approval for the amendments to be implemented.

In discussion, particular reference was made to:-

- a) The majority of objections to the consultation were from Tavistock. It was felt that it could be due to the recent issues generated around the on-street parking.
- b) It was felt that Devon County Members should be copied into any future consultation responses to future proposals from Devon County Council for on-street parking charges and ask them to pursue DCC to ensure a response is given.

It was then:

RESOLVED

1. that the results of the statutory public consultation be noted;
2. that the following amendments to the West Devon Borough Council (Off-Street Parking Places) (Variation No.1) Order 2022 be approved:-

- i. the Pay and Display charges be amended in accordance with Appendix A of the presented agenda report;
 - ii. Abbey car park be changed from a 4-hour maximum stay to a 6-hour maximum stay car park; and
 - iii. Brentor car park and Lydford car park be removed from the West Devon Borough Council (Off Street Parking Places) Order 2022; and
3. that the lead Hub Committee Member for People and Communities write to Devon County Council to request that the Council is proactively consulted on any future proposed changes to the on-street parking in Tavistock or Okehampton to ensure that these can be considered by the Council in relation to the economic impact on the respective towns.

(The meeting terminated at 3.05 pm)

Chairman

(NOTE: THESE DECISIONS, WILL BECOME EFFECTIVE FROM 5.00PM ON THURSDAY, 18 APRIL 2024, UNLESS CALLED IN, IN ACCORDANCE WITH SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES)

Hub Committee Forward Plan

About the Forward Plan

This is the provisional forward plan for at least four months starting June 2024. It provides an indicative date for matters to be considered by the Hub Committee. Where possible, the Hub Committee will keep to the dates shown in the plan. However, it may be necessary for some items to be rescheduled and other items added.

The forward plan is published to publicise consultation dates and enable dialogue between the Hub Committee and all Councillors, the public, and other stakeholders. It will also assist the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in planning their contribution to policy development and holding the Hub Committee to account.

The Plan is published on the Council's website (www.westdevon.gov.uk)

About the Hub Committee

The Hub Committee currently consists of nine Councillors. Each has responsibility for a particular area of the Council's work.

- Leader of the Council – Cllr Mandy Ewings
- Deputy Leader of the Council, with specific responsibility for Housing – Cllr Mark Renders
- Lead Hub Member for Customer Experience & Accessible Services – Cllr Jeff Moody
- Lead Hub Member for Economy & Jobs – Cllr Neil Jory
- Lead Hub Member for Climate & Biodiversity - Cllr Ursula Mann
- Lead Hub Member for Community Wellbeing – Cllr Jane Elliott
- Lead Hub Member for Planning & Built Environment – Cllr Caroline Mott
- Lead Hub Member for Neighbourhood Services – Cllr Adam Bridgewater
- Lead Hub Member for Performance & Resources – Cllr Chris Edmonds

Further information on the workings of the Hub Committee, including latest information on agenda items, can be obtained by contacting Democratic Services on 01803 861105 or by e-mail to democratic.services@swdevon.gov.uk

All items listed in this Forward Plan will be discussed in public at the relevant meeting, unless otherwise indicated with *



Forward Plan from June 2024

| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------|---|--|---|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Leader | <p>Title: Peer Challenge Review Report</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the report arising from the recent Peer Review Challenge.</p> | Cllr Ewings / Andy Bates | Report of the Chief Executive | 11 June 2024 | |
| Community Wellbeing | <p>Title: Cost of Living Crisis: Plans for Household Support Fund Allocation (1 April to 30 September 2024) and 12 Month Review of the Revenues and Benefits Service</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that sets out the proposed plans for the Household Support Fund Allocation for the period from 1 April to 30 September 2024 and presents the 12 Month Review into the Revenues and Benefits Service</p> | Cllr Elliott / Steve Mullineaux / Geni Hotchkiss | Report of the Head of Revenues and Benefits | 11 June 2024 | |
| Community Wellbeing | <p>Title: Q3 and Q4 Write-Off Report 2023/24</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that seeks to write-off a number of debts that are deemed to be irrecoverable from Quarters 3 and 4 in 2023/24.</p> | Cllr Elliott / Steve Mullineaux / Geni Hotchkiss | Report of the Head of Revenues and Benefits | 11 June 2024 | |
| Leader | <p>Title: Productivity Plan</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council's draft Productivity Plan for approval.</p> | Cllr Ewings / Lisa Buckle | Report of the Section 151 Officer | 11 June 2024 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing – Parish Profiles</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that seeks endorsement of the Parish Profiles approach.</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of Head of Housing | 11 June 2024 | |
| Leader | <p>Title: Working for Our Communities – 2023/24 Progress Report</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council’s draft Annual Report for consideration.</p> | Cllr Ewings / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 23 July 2024 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Council Plan – Integrated Performance Monitoring Report</p> <p>Purpose: To consider the integrated performance monitoring report for the period from April to June 2024.</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 23 July 2024 | |
| Neighbourhood Services | <p>Title: Management of Open Spaces</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that provides an update on the Council’s approach to its management of open spaces.</p> | Cllr Bridgewater / Steve Mullineaux | Report of the Deputy Chief Executive | 23 July 2024 | |
| Economy & Jobs | <p>Title: Update on Economic Strategy and Developments</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents a progress update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Active Travel initiative.</p> | Cllr Jory / Chris Brook / Chris Shears | Report of the Head of Economy | 23 July 2024 | |
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing Update – Standing Agenda Item</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of the Head of Housing | 23 July 2024 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Purpose: To consider a standing agenda item in relation to housing. | | | | |
| Leader | Title: Corporate Peer Challenge: Outline Plan Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council's draft Outline Plan that has been produced in response to the recent Corporate Peer Challenge. | Cllr Ewings / Andy Bates / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 23 July 2024 | |
| Performance and Resources | Title: 2023/24 Outturn Report Purpose: To consider a report that presents the 2023/24 Outturn Report | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle | Report of the Section 151 Officer | 23 July 2024 | |
| Leader | Title: Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council's Action Plan that has been produced in response to the recent Corporate Peer Challenge. | Cllr Ewings / Andy Bates / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 24 September 2024 | |
| Community Wellbeing | Title: De-carbonising Existing Housing Purpose: To consider a report that informs the Hub Committee of progress on de-carbonising the Council's existing housing. | Cllr Elliott / Chris Brook / Ian Luscombe | Report of Head of Environmental Health | 24 September 2024 | |
| Leader | Title: Plans for Re-Opening Rail in West Devon Purpose: To consider a report that provides an update on | Cllr Ewings / Chris Brook | Report of the Director: Place and Enterprise | 24 September 2024 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|------------------------|---|---|---|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | the plans for re-opening the rail network in West Devon. | | | | |
| Community Wellbeing | <p>Title: Proposed Changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025/26</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that sets out a series of proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2025/26.</p> | Cllr Elliott / Steve Mullineaux / Geni Hotchkiss | Report of the Head of Revenues and Benefits | 24 September 2024 | |
| Community Wellbeing | <p>Title: Alcohol Public Space Protection Orders</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents a series of recommendations in relation to Alcohol Public Space Protection Orders.</p> | Cllr Elliott / Chris Brook / Ian Luscombe | Report of the Head of Environmental Health | 24 September 2024 | |
| Neighbourhood Services | <p>Title: Car Parking Charges Update</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents an update on Car Parking charges.</p> | Cllr Bridgewater / Steve Mullineaux / Emma Widdicombe | Report of the Principal Assets Officer | 24 September 2024 | |
| Climate & Biodiversity | <p>Title: Waste Services Update</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents an update on the Council's Waste Service.</p> | Cllr Mann / Steve Mullineaux / Sarah Moody | Report of the Assistant Director – Waste and Operations | 24 September 2024 | |
| Climate & Biodiversity | <p>Title: Street Scene Enforcement</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents an update in respect of Street Scene Enforcement.</p> | Cllr Mann / Steve Mullineaux / Sarah Moody | Report of the Assistant Director – Waste and Operations | 24 September 2024 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Neighbourhood Services | <p>Title: Plan for Community Development, to include Arts and Culture</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that sets out the draft Plan for Community Development that includes the Council's proposed approach to the arts and culture agenda.</p> | Cllr Bridgewater / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 24 September 2024 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Month 4 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the latest revenue budget monitoring position to the end of July 2024 (Month 4)</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 24 September 2024 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Month 4 Capital Programme Monitoring Report 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the latest capital programme monitoring position to the end of July 2024 (Month 4)</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 24 September 2024 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Medium Term Financial Strategy (2025/26 – 2029/30)</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy for the period from 2025/26 to 2029/30.</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 24 September 2024 | |
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing Update – Standing Agenda Item</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of the Head of Housing | 24 September 2024 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------------|---|--|---|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Purpose: To consider a standing agenda item in relation to housing. | | | | |
| Performance and Resources | Title: Council Plan – Integrated Performance Monitoring Report Purpose: To consider the integrated performance monitoring report for the period from July to October 2024. | Cllr Edmonds / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 3 December 2024 | |
| Economy & Jobs | Title: UK Shared Prosperity Fund Update: Purpose: To consider a report that presents a progress update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Active Travel initiative. | Cllr Jory / Chris Brook / Chris Shears | Report of the Head of Economy | 3 December 2024 | |
| Leader | Title: Council Plan Draft Year 2 Delivery Plan Purpose: To consider a report that presents the draft Council Plan Year 2 Delivery Plan for consideration. | Cllr Ewings / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 3 December 2024 | |
| Leader | Title: Draft Revenue and Capital Budget 2025/26 Purpose: To consider a report that sets out a draft set of Revenue and Capital Budget proposals for 2025/26 for public consultation. | Cllr Ewings / Lisa Buckle | Report of the Section 151 Officer | 3 December 2024 | |
| Leader | Title: Institute of Customer Satisfaction Survey Results and Draft Action Plan Purpose: To consider a report that presents the results of the recent Institute of | Cllr Ewings / Steve Mullineaux / Jim Davis | Report of Head of Customer Service Improvement | 3 December 2024 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Customer Satisfaction Survey and that seeks approval of a draft Action Plan. | | | | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Draft Procurement Strategy</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council's draft Procurement Strategy for approval.</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 3 December 2024 | |
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing Update – Standing Agenda Item</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a standing agenda item in relation to housing.</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of the Head of Housing | 3 December 2024 | |
| Leader | <p>Title: Draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that sets out a draft set of Revenue and Capital Budget proposals for 2024/25.</p> | Cllr Ewings / Lisa Buckle | Report of the Section 151 Officer | 28 January 2025 | |
| Leader | <p>Title: Council Plan Year 2 Delivery Plan</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the Council Plan Year 2 Delivery Plan for consideration.</p> | Cllr Ewings / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 28 January 2025 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Month 7 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the latest revenue budget monitoring position to the end of October 2024 (Month 7)</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 28 January 2025 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Month 7 Capital Programme Monitoring Report 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the latest capital programme monitoring position to the end of October 2024 (Month 7)</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 28 January 2025 | |
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing Update – Standing Agenda Item</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a standing agenda item in relation to housing.</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of the Head of Housing | 28 January 2025 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Council Plan – Integrated Performance Monitoring Report</p> <p>Purpose: To consider the integrated performance monitoring report for the period from November 2024 to January 2025.</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Drew Powell / Neil Hawke | Report of the Assistant Director: Strategy and Organisational Development | 11 March 2025 | |
| Economy & Jobs | <p>Title: UK Shared Prosperity Fund Update:</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents a progress update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Active Travel initiative.</p> | Cllr Jory / Chris Brook / Chris Shears | Report of the Head of Economy | 11 March 2025 | |
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Month 10 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the latest revenue budget monitoring position to the end of January 2025 (Month 10)</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 11 March 2025 | |



| Portfolio Area | Report Title and Summary | Lead Member / SLT lead / Report Author | Documents to be considered in making decision | Date of Decision | Consultees and means of consultation |
|------------------------------|--|---|---|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Performance and Resources | <p>Title: Month 10 Capital Programme Monitoring Report 2024/25</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the latest capital programme monitoring position to the end of January 2025 (Month 10)</p> | Cllr Edmonds / Lisa Buckle / Pauline Henstock | Report of the Deputy Section 151 Officer | 11 March 2025 | |
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing Update – Standing Agenda Item</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a standing agenda item in relation to housing.</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of the Head of Housing | 11 March 2025 | |
| Housing | <p>Title: Housing Update – Standing Agenda Item</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a standing agenda item in relation to housing.</p> | Cllr Renders / Chris Brook / Issy Blake | Report of the Head of Housing | 8 April 2025 | |
| Planning & Built Environment | <p>Title: Okehampton Neighbourhood Plan</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that presents the draft Neighbourhood Plan and seeks approval for it to proceed to Referendum.</p> | Cllr Mott / Drew Powell / Graham Swiss | Report of the Senior Strategic Planning Officer | TBC | |
| Community Wellbeing | <p>Title: Alcohol Public Space Protection Orders</p> <p>Purpose: To consider a report that seeks adoption of a series of Alcohol Public Space Protection Orders in the Borough.</p> | Cllr Elliott / Chris Brook / Ian Luscombe | Report of the Head of Environmental Health | TBC (Late autumn) | |

Report to: **Hub Committee**

Date: **11 June 2024**

Title: **Corporate Peer Challenge 2024**

Portfolio Area: **Cllr Mandy Ewings**
Leader West Devon Borough Council

Wards Affected: **All**

Author: **Andy Bates** Role: **Chief Executive**

Contact: Directors@swdevon.gov.uk

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Hub Committee:

- 1. Notes the positive assessment of West Devon Borough Council provided in the Local Government Association’s feedback report following the Peer Challenge in March 2024.**
- 2. Endorses the recommendations set out in the report and the proposal to collaborate with partners and key stakeholders to develop an action plan in response to the recommendations made.**

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 All councils are expected to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge every 5 years.
- 1.2 The Local Government Association (“LGA”) undertook the Peer Challenge of both West Devon Borough Council and our shared services partner, South Hams District Council in March 2024.
- 1.3 A team of sector specialists spent 4 days on site during which time they spoke to more than 100 people including councillors, external partners, managers and staff. The week concluded with the peer team presenting their initial findings, which have now been developed further in their final report for West Devon (Appendix A).
- 1.4 The next step is for the council to consider the recommendations and feedback provided and to develop an action plan in response. It is proposed, where appropriate, to develop the action plan with partners to ensure it reflects our shared ambitions and then to incorporate it into the wider Council Plan. It is intended that the initial draft action plan will be considered by Hub Committee at its meeting in July 2024.

2. Key Findings

- 2.1 The executive summary of the report provides a very useful overview of the peer team's findings and conclusions, and which is overall extremely positive of the work the council is doing.
- 2.2 Key findings include that, "**West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and is delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities**". There is also positive endorsement for the clear strategic direction provided by the new political administration in quickly agreeing its plans and for its clear intent to continue to work collaboratively across the political spectrum to drive meaningful change in the borough. The positive organisational culture exemplified by good member to member and member to officer working relationships is also highlighted.
- 2.3 The report points to the key significance of the partnership arrangements between West Devon and South Hams supported by a single workforce, and integrated systems and process, and concluded, "**it is this joint working that is at the heart of a highly productive organisation**".
- 2.4 The peer team commented on the good organisational leadership, robust governance and an effective and established performance culture which is delivering improved outcomes, pointing to a focus by the senior officer team on professionalism, leadership, accountability and delivery and to the positive feedback staff had given on working for the council.
- 2.5 The report highlights the council's sound financial management, saying, "**West Devon Borough Council has an excellent track record for financial stewardship and leadership**".
- 2.6 It also commented positively on the council's approach to partnership working and to the complimentary feedback from partner organisations, which demonstrates how well regarded the political and managerial leadership of the Council is.
- 2.7 The report sets out eight recommendations for the council to build upon its solid foundations. These recommendations are:
1. have a relentless focus on the delivery of the council plan;
 2. create opportunities for your senior leadership team to focus on the key challenges and opportunities ahead;
 3. agree your desired approach to community development and then create a structured approach to delivery;

4. use the opportunity provided by the new council plan to revisit your stakeholder engagement;
5. tell your story louder – which clearly articulates both your vision for place and the impact of your activity;
6. build upon the foundations of your new organisational development plan over the next 2 to 3 years to ensure you can meet new and emerging challenges and opportunities.
7. develop a 4-year member development programme that maximises the input and engagement of your members; and
8. Review the role, function and purpose of advisory panels and working groups.

2.8 It is encouraging the above reflect areas that the leadership of the council had already assessed as requiring focus. These recommendations will form the basis for our action plan.

2.9 Members, officers and our partners should be rightly proud of the positive endorsement of our collective progress and working relationships and we can now continue to work together to address the recommendations of our peers.

3. Next Steps

- 3.1 The LGA expects the council to publish its report on our website by 22nd June 2024.
- 3.2 The Hub Committee and Senior Leadership Team have already commenced steps of developing an outline action plan to address the recommendations as set out in 2.7 of this report.
- 3.3 The intention is that where it makes sense to do so, we will develop actions with our partners.
- 3.4 The outline action plan will be considered by the Hub Committee at its meeting in July 2024.
- 3.5 A follow-up review by a smaller team of peers will take place in early 2025 to assess progress against the recommendations.

4. Implications

| Implications | Relevant to proposals Y/N | Details and proposed measures to address |
|------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Legal/Governance | | A Corporate Peer Challenge provide an opportunity for an in-depth review of the Councils governance framework. An assessment of this is included within Appendix A to this report. There are however no direct legal or governance implications. |

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| Financial implications to include reference to value for money | | <p>The Corporate Peer Challenge considers the financial management, planning and overall Value for Money of the Council and sets out its findings within Appendix A.</p> <p>There are however no direct financial or value for money implications arising from this report.</p> |
| Risk | | <p>The Corporate Peer Challenge considers the Councils approach to risk and opportunity management with its findings being set out within Appendix A.</p> <p>There are however no risk implications arising from this report.</p> |
| Council Plan contribution | | All |
| Consultation & Engagement Strategy | | The Corporate Peer Challenge involved a wide range of stakeholders from elected members, officers, key partners and neighbouring local authorities. |
| Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact | | No climate and biodiversity impact as a result of this report. |
| Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications | | |
| Equality and Diversity | | NA |
| Safeguarding | | NA |
| Community Safety, Crime and Disorder | | NA |
| Health, Safety and Wellbeing | | NA |
| Other implications | | NA |

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Appendix A: - West Devon Borough Council Peer Challenge Report 2024

Background Papers:

None

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

West Devon Borough Council

19 – 22 March 2024

Feedback report





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1. Introduction

This Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) was conducted at West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) and South Hams District Council (SHDC) simultaneously, for very practical reasons. The councils share staff and senior management, and therefore have one joint workforce. However, they are both very much sovereign and separate councils, with different governance systems, different councillors, different policies, separate budgets, and the areas have different challenges alongside shared opportunities. As a result, it was agreed with the councils that two reports would be produced, one for each council. It was also agreed that joint recommendations and where appropriate recommendations for each council would be made by the peer challenge team and this approach is reflected within this report.

Corporate Peer Challenge is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending 4 days at WDBC and SHDC to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, Accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils to meet their Best Value duty with the UK Government draft guidance expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years. West Devon's last CPC took place in November 2018.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

2. Executive Summary

West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and is

delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities.

Following the district elections in May 2023, the political leadership of West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) changed; resulting in an Independent led alliance the 'West Devon Alliance', and a new council leader. The new administration has 'hit the ground running' and a great strength of the arrangements is the clear intent to continue to work collaboratively across the political spectrum to drive meaningful change in the borough; this has been a key hallmark of WDBC over time. This is to the credit of all political groups, but especially the leader who has worked tirelessly to ensure an alliance drawing on the talents, skills and experiences of all members is in place for the benefit of the residents of West Devon.

The council's chief executive and senior officer team should take credit for supporting the political parties at the council prepare for a range of scenarios both in advance of and following the May 2023 elections. This proactivity in preparing for and effectively responding to change is a strong feature of the relationship between the members and senior officers within the council, which has the hallmarks of a pragmatic, trusting and ever maturing leadership team.

It is evident that the council prepared well for the potential change in May and is now reaping the benefits. That effective preparation has meant that the council already has in place a well socialised Council Plan covering the period 2024-28. The plan, its priorities and delivery outcomes are likewise reflected in the detail of a three-year rolling financial strategy, which is the norm for the council. The council has an excellent track record of financial management and planning, which is one of its underpinning core strengths.

When we spoke to the respective leaders at WDBC and SHDC, it was clear to the peer team, that although both authorities have many effective partnerships, it is their councils' joint partnership and senior officer team which is the most important. It has and continues to deliver significant resilience and strategic capacity, but importantly it also means the 'voice' of both councils is amplified to great effect. As such both councils can look to the future with optimism.

That optimism should also exist because the council delivers core services well; the importance of which should not be underestimated , given the current challenges facing the wider sector.

WDBC have a council plan, a matching finance plan and most recently a delivery plan to help ensure the council keeps on track - all of these key building blocks create a positive culture of continuous improvement. That culture of embracing sector led improvement, sharing and seeking out best practice is characterised by the senior members actively engaging in policy development and addressing key challenges e.g. the council leader chairing of the Devon Housing Taskforce, or the senior officer team's achievement of 'Senior Leadership Team of the Year' for 2023 at the Municipal Journal national awards. We saw both WDBC and SHDC positively engaging with the wider sector and maximising opportunities to seek out and add to national best practice. Going forward it will be important that both political and managerial leadership, but the officer senior leadership team especially keep their 'antennae' on the future of local government and create the opportunities to look out and beyond so that the two councils continue to stay ahead of the curve.

The council's focus on partnerships is key, as reflected in that key partnership with SHDC. With nearly every partner group or representative the peer team spoke with, we heard time and again, how well regarded the political and managerial leadership at WDBC are. That positivity should give the council the confidence to build upon this now and seek out further opportunities to maximise and develop these relationships to help deliver priorities for WDBC, but also to influence and address wider challenges, such as the housing crisis across Devon, or continuing to ensure effective support for all care leavers throughout the county.

We saw great opportunities for enhanced local working at a town and parish level to also create added value for WDBC. The leader has a very personal and passionate focus on localities and communities and working hand in glove with parish and town councils. The challenge now is to build upon that good working relationship to help ensure the council's key priorities, such as its focus on the natural environment, are firmly embedded across the council area through effective local community engagement.

We found a district council with a strong corporate core and good organisational leadership. There is robust governance with an effective and established performance culture delivering improved outcomes. There are clear collective and individual accountabilities and responsibilities with both officers and members able to articulate how they contribute to the delivery of the council plan.

The single workforce, integrated systems and processes supporting two councils creates resilience and the peer team found an officer core that has the capacity to deliver the council plan as currently articulated (and indeed the separate one at SHDC). It is this joint working that is at the heart of a highly productive organisation. However, we were clear that the need to remain steadfastly focussed on that and not be diverted elsewhere is key, as there isn't the capacity for anything beyond this. As such maintaining a resolute focus on delivery and performance remains key.

The above is important context as changes and challenges will inevitably happen during the course of the four years of WDBC's political administration. Indeed, there will be national and county elections in the period of the next 12 months or so. Therefore, ensuring the council is aware of the external political impact that such events can create is important. The council has recent experience of preparing well for political change and the value of this learning should not be understated and it has put the council on the front foot. The peer team felt that almost a year on from that change of political control there is a real opportunity to reinvigorate the strength of the whole membership across the council and encouraged the senior political and managerial team to ensure that all members are: well developed, well engaged and collectively resolute on ensuring the delivery of the council plan, through a changing political landscape.

Both councils are clearly progressing their approaches to equality and diversity as well as their slightly different but complementary approaches to engaging with communities. Having positively embarked on work in these key areas, it is now time for the councils to articulate their individual and collective strategic approach and demonstrate what their expected outcomes in respect of diversity and community engagement really mean for their council, their place and what will be more effectively achieved through that renewed focus.

We found two councils which have been through significant and fundamental organisational change some 7+ years ago now. Those previous changes were challenging and their legacy impact on the morale and capacity of the councils until recently has been evident.

The appointment of the new chief executive nearly four years ago marked a sea change for the councils. He introduced a pragmatic, evidenced based and more

engaged service by service change process, as opposed to a former 'big bang' pan-organisational one. This more sustainable approach is serving WDBC and SHDC well and helping them drive forward improved service design and delivery. Both councils have now put in place far more effective and practical arrangements to manage change. Furthermore the focus on professionalism, leadership, accountability and delivery are clearly evident. Now that there is a focus on real and meaningful engagement with the workforce and a clear organisational development plan in place, the peer team are confident that we will be able to report strong outcomes from this work when we revisit the councils to gauge progress in 12 months' time.

The peer team found two councils in WDBC and SHDC who really do, as one external stakeholder told us 'punch above their weight.' The strength of their collective partnership is a story of success and the development of new and ambitious council plans in each within a short timeframe, is a testament to their intention to improve outcomes for local people and communities. The peer team would encourage both councils to use the experience of the peer challenge to reflect on the progress they have made, not be shy in telling that story positively, and continue to be an example to the sector of what can be achieved through strong and effective leadership and partnership.

3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

1. Have a relentless focus on the delivery of the council plan

Focus your capacity on delivering your plans - recognise anything new will require a review of council plans and activity.

2. Create opportunities for your senior leadership team to focus on the key challenges and opportunities ahead

Consider how senior officers create space to continue their strategic thinking/horizon scanning - you want to be a sector leader and this space is key.

3. Agree your desired approach to community development and then

create a structured approach to delivery

This will help you both articulate your plans, creating a clear narrative to for communities and partners alike and allow you to focus on developing the social capital within your council areas

4. Use the opportunity provided by the new council plan to revisit your stakeholder engagement

You can maximise your influence and engagement within WDBC and SHDC and across Devon as a whole

5. Tell your story louder – which clearly articulates both your vision for place and the impact of your activity.

By doing this well, you will help the delivery of the other recommendations listed in this report

6. Build upon the foundations of your new organisational development plan over the next 2 to 3 years to ensure you can meet new and emerging challenges and opportunities.

You have set in place a solid plan, it addresses the here and now, and you can and should keep iterating and developing this through time, so it remains purposeful and relevant

7. Develop a 4-year member development programme that maximises the input and engagement of your members

You have a great opportunity a year into the new administration to revisit and engage your membership afresh with the new council plan and make the most of the added value your membership group creates

8. Review the role, function and purpose of advisory panels and working groups

Members welcomed their close working and engagement but were not sufficiently clear how your current arrangements add the value you want

4. Summary of the peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Cllr James MacCleary, Lewes District Council - Liberal Democrat Member Peer
- Cllr Sarah Rouse, Malvern District Council – Independent Member Peer
- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Breckland District Council – Conservative Member Peer
- Arthur Charvonia, Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils – Chief Executive Peer
- Chris Hall, Executive Director – Community Services, Somerset Council – Officer Peer
- Sarah Garner , Head of People and OD, Wealden District Council – Officer Peer
- Lydia Rusling, Assistant Director Economic Growth, South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership - Officer Peer
- Paul Clarke, Principal Advisor – LGA Peer
- Emily McGuinness, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?

3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management - Does the council have a grip on its** current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on the areas below. These are incorporated into the body of this report:

- A consideration of the council's work over the past 12 months ahead of a potential change of control and managing the transition to the new political administrations in both councils
- Managing and supporting our people – how effective is the council's organisational development plan and our emerging approach to EDI
- Considering the council's approach to future challenges – and are they fit for the future?

4.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at

West Devon and South Hams Councils and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports) and an LG Inform report outlining key performance benchmarking information for the council.

The peer team then spent 4 days on site at both councils during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 60 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

First and foremost it is impressive, that with a change of political administration at the council in May 2023, i.e. the 'West Devon Alliance', comprising Independent, Green, Lib Dem and Labour councillors, that there is already in place a Council Plan, with eight clear priorities laid out in respect of: the built environment, natural environment, housing, economy, people & communities, health & well-being, accessibility & communications and performance & resources. Those priorities reflect the key issues that bind the alliance and indeed the overall council together and therefore are clearly owned by the council's membership. The council plan priorities have been subject to public consultation.

The same outcome, a clearly funded council plan has been achieved in SHDC and it is a testament to the effectiveness of the respective new political administrations and the chief executive and his senior leadership team that this process has been undertaken so smoothly, allowing for distinctive priorities and annual delivery plans. The delivery plans which underpin the council plan and set out the key actions and priorities, have been resourced to ensure the council's priorities are translated into

practical realities. For example, in respect of the natural environment the council is investing a further £50K to work in partnership with Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest to identify opportunities for tree planting and biodiversity in the borough. These delivery plans are clearly aligned with existing and future financial and organisational capacity. This is important on two counts, firstly it identifies the key relationship between resource and output, but secondly it shows clearly to all that there is little room for further manoeuvre. The peer teams' message to the council was clear, you have a clear plan now focus on delivering against it and do not be distracted from that.

It is important that the council continues to lever the strength and engagement of its partners to deliver both its own plan priorities but also shared objectives. We witnessed productive working relationships between WDBC and its town and parish councils, who we found were very willing to work alongside the council to shape policies and service delivery. That well engaged grouping along with many more community groups besides can be key to driving change and enhancing capacity and social capital. Therefore, the peer team felt it would be very useful for a structured plan and proactive approach to community development to be crafted, building upon the solid bedrock of that which exists now. This should also help with the clarity of stakeholder engagement and management, so the council prioritises its focus and resources as effectively as possible. It is encouraging to see the council, as one stakeholder described it 'stepping up to the plate' in terms of that partnership and delivering on key priorities for its own and the wider place agenda.

We spoke with a range of WDBC's partners, and the same themes were fed back to the peer team. Overall, partners were clear about both the council's vision and clarity of purpose and importantly stated how it was helping them deliver their own objectives, for example in respect of the Devon wide housing challenges. Overall, they view the council as a positive and responsive partner. Indeed, the same is true of SHDC and frequently we were told that the chief executive has personal credibility in the partnership arena and has made a clear difference. The leaders of both councils are equally well respected.

That same acknowledgement of respect and value is clear right across the council membership. We heard that councillors are valued community advocates and effective conduits for the voice of the community into both councils. The peer team

did feel that although the councils have different but complementary plans there is further synergy and learning that can be done across the joint membership both within and across the councils but just as importantly outwardly too, to draw learning from the sector as a whole. This speaks to the desire from members we spoke with, to learn and develop and share, which is a very healthy mindset.

Building upon the learning point above, a year into the new council administration it was evident that the leader leads by example in respect of this. She takes her own learning and development seriously and is clearly growing into the role. She was referred to many times as being valued by and visible in the community and she has both a passion but also a preoccupation for driving the community focus that is so key to the DNA of the council.

The peer team felt that there is now a great opportunity for the council to further sell and deliver the strength of that collaborative political approach, which is so important to enabling the delivery of the council plan. We felt that WDBC should now create a compelling narrative for use internally and externally which sets out not only what it is planning or doing but also the impact this is having or will have within the community and combine this with a more iterative approach without waiting for the 'finished' article.

In terms of delivery against council priorities, the peer team found a strong and improving framework for corporate governance and performance management at WDBC. This is reflected in very positive external audit findings and seen in the council's integrated performance management reporting process, which is reported through to and overseen by the 'Hub'¹ at WDBC and Executive at SHDC.

The peer team also found strong internal audit arrangements, with clear reporting and oversight at the council's Audit and Governance Committee. For example, we saw an audit recommendations tracker which ensures key audit findings are delivered and reviewed. We also saw a clear plan of audits going forward, focusing on key risk areas e.g. cyber security, financial stability and new systems. Within all of this, there is a clear line of sight of members and their ownership, engagement and review is evident, for example, through the development of a new council plans, as

¹ Hub Committee is a group of elected Councillors at West Devon Borough Council. Each member of Hub Committee has a specific area of responsibility to lead on.

well as the annual report of performance from previous year.

Both WDBC and SHDC have used service reviews to very good effect to drive improvement and effectiveness in services e.g. revenue and benefits, where cost savings have been made and improved response times and customer satisfaction gained.

This robust framework helps drive strong performance in key areas. For example, the planning service was an area that required improvement and through a review and action plan that service is beginning to show tangible improvements and is on a positive trajectory in both councils e.g. WDBC performance in terms of major planning application determined in 13 weeks was at 100% and non-major applications determined in 8 weeks was 87% as at January 2024, both well above the national targets. A copy of the councils Headline performance report is here

[LGA Inform - West Devon Headline Report](#)

The peers saw an effective performance reporting culture at WDBC, incorporating a focus on the importance of customer feedback. This has helped inform service redesign e.g. changes in contact centre arrangements to secure improvement and savings in revenues and benefits.

Overall, we found a very clear and evident ‘golden thread’ running through the council’s performance management – from the council plan and strategies, through to delivery and service plans, right through to staff appraisal. This is a significant strength the council should be proud of.

Given the above strengths the peer team had just a few reflections to offer to encourage the council to improve even further:

- The council might build on customer feedback and encourage that more, in line with its plans for more effective community engagement, so real insights are captured, analysed and built upon.
- Could WDBC use more/better/different comparisons on a national basis, essentially seeking out best in class and learning from that
- Could the council build upon its performance model by using an evidence-based approach, including qualitative measures – insights, surveys, thematic check ins with communities and members-stronger feedback loops?

Overall, though the peer team's final reflection is that both councils should be rightly proud of the current performance managements arrangements and should continue to welcome further external critical friend review, such as the peer challenge.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

In terms of both organisational and place leadership, the new Leader at WDBC sets the tone. She is inclusive and collaborative, and that key strength was demonstrated right through the political leadership at the council, where the very best talents of the membership of the council are utilised to the full. This is very much building upon the approach that has served WDBC well over time.

We saw effective engagement both with parish and town councils and community groups within West Devon but also with key partners such as Devon County, Plymouth City and Torbay councils and the same is true of SHDC. This places WDBC in a stronger position of influence but also as a partner of choice and one that is valued and respected. Such proactive engagement means that the Leader of the council is valued for her role as chair of the Devon wide Housing Taskforce².

As highlighted, housing is a key priority for both WDBC and SHDC and the peer team found strong leadership in housing across both councils and within the officer leadership and housing team specifically. The peer team felt that this was an area where change and innovation in one council e.g. the appointment of a lead South Hams housing officer, is being replicated in West Devon and offers an opportunity to bring further benefits from their shared services arrangements.

That strong leadership is translated into tangible outcomes through the way the housing team operate as they utilise to the full the available levers available to them to deliver housing improvement in a complex housing picture. Like so many rural areas housing stock is limited and costs are increasing at the same time as incomes have flattened. This burden on affordability has the potential to increase pressure on the council in managing homelessness cases. The council is maximising the use of the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) to increase council controlled stock and prevent runaway placement costs for temporary accommodation.

² [Experts join together to act as powerful voice to solve Devon's housing crisis - News](#)

The jointly owned and operated 'Seamoor Lettings' provides an opportunity to connect tenants and landlords with the support of the council to help maintain that relationship. Whilst not a unique solution this remains rare and shows leadership in meeting statutory homelessness demand head on in an environment of nationally increasing costs. Strong relationships have been built with private sector landlords and additional support is provided to the tenant and landlord in this relationship reducing the breakdown of tenancies and supporting tenants to build a reference enabling them to move on more easily when they choose to do so. This shows a willingness and capability to meet the challenge head on.

The Council has successfully secured Levelling Up Funding (LUF) monies for a new railway station and integrated transport hub in Okehampton, a collaboration between WDBC, DCC, Network Rail and GWR. As the accountable body for this £13.5m project, the council would not have achieved this had they not already had in place a trusted, strong partnership between DCC at both member and senior officer level.

That strength of partnership and place leadership is clearly evident in the Joint Local Plan (JLP), with Plymouth, West Devon and South Hams, one of just a handful nationally. This enables the built and economic assets that are evident across the urban areas, the protected landscapes of the moors and the host of thriving towns and villages, right across West Devon, South Hams and Plymouth to have a strong joint planning policy framework. Over the lifetime of the plan, housing delivery has exceeded the national target of housing required annually, i.e. nearly 1,500 per year and there has always been a surplus position for 5-year land supply.

The Council is responding well to meeting the needs of the community and businesses not only in areas of its direct responsibility but also areas where this may have traditionally been a county council responsibility such as LCWIP, active travel and establishing thematic groups to support UKSPF (United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund) project.

Similarly the council, along with SHDC and the other Devon districts are working collaboratively with the county council to support and promote a better future for the children of Devon by making a clear commitment to care experienced young people in Devon, for example by scrapping council tax for those young people up to the age

of 25 and stepping up to the plate as a corporate parent³. The chief executive is the lead officer for the corporate parenting groups looking at housing needs and he and the leader are very active in promoting improved outcomes for Devon's care leavers. The county council is likely to be due a reinspection of their children services within 12 months and such commitments will hopefully be reflected in an improved rating from that inspection.

As shown above, WDBC and SHDC are effective and trusted partners who work in collaboration with others to lead, convene and deliver meaningful change. The peer team would encourage the councils to reflect upon how they can further exploit their collective influence politically as well as managerially, now they are twelve months into the lives of both new administrations, so that the sovereign but joint views of West Devon and South Hams councils and their communities are championed

The council has a clearly articulated commitment to protecting the natural environment, and through innovative matrix management approaches, has ensured that there is officer capacity to support their ambitions as currently stated in the council plan. Both councils declared a climate emergency in 2019 and are signatories to the 'Devon Climate Emergency Response'. Looking to lead by example, a key aim is to reduce the council's organisational carbon emissions to net-zero by 2030. Having established a detailed understanding of the council's greenhouse gas emissions, an organisation decarbonisation study has been developed and resources identified to work towards this aim. The councils are 'Carbon Literate Organisations' following the successful programme to train the senior leadership team and all heads of service in 2021. This training is now being cascaded through the organisation by two in-house trainers. Further to a piloting exercise, the planned implementation of an environmental and social impact assessment tool will ensure future policy and spending decisions are informed by an understanding of their wider climate and biodiversity implications.

The peer team felt that the newly established community development team could be a valuable engagement resource to support Members at both councils. Continually building in stronger and effective feedback loops and engagement with communities through members is key as they can play a leading role in ensuring the connectivity

³ [Council helping care leavers into employment | West Devon Borough Council](#)

and co-ordination across key council priority areas. Likewise, the peer team also felt that this maturing partnership landscape could potentially benefit from a structured place board approach which would underpin the existing good working relationships and secure commitment to the delivery of shared local priorities and potentially provide a vehicle for unlocking future wider aspirations.

In respect of the single workforce operating across both councils, it is important to reflect that this is an embedded, mature and well performing shared services model that is understood by all, producing in excess of £6m savings year on year and delivering key services to residents, which are overall improving and/or delivered to a high standard.

The peer team found very positive senior officer and member relations across both councils and the chief executive, and his senior team have worked tirelessly to ensure the ambitions and plans for both new council administrations have been established in a short period of time. This is far easier to say than to do, and in WDBC and SHDC it is already done.

We found a stable and effective senior leadership team, which has been publicly recognised through the award of the MJ's 'Senior Leadership Team of the Year' for 2023. We found a strong steer from the chief executive and beyond him evidence of good distributive decision making, across the senior leadership team, so empowerment and accountability is now far clearer across a wide range of services, than it has been previously. There remained a couple of areas where it may be useful to reflect on lines of accountability – the obvious area would be in planning, given the recent departure of a leading change agent, senior officer within that service, but that is for the councils to reflect upon. Given the present performance and direction of travel, it could equally be argued that current arrangements are clearly working well. Beyond that we would advise the council's senior leaders to continually welcome challenge, such as the LGA led peer review; it seemed to the peer team that such a mindset was clearly taking hold and we viewed that very positively.

There has been significant investment in a development programme to support middle managers to enhance line management skills and competencies. In the peer teams view, based upon our engagement with that group of staff and others besides, that proactive approach is having a positive impact in addressing legacy issues

associated with previous and possibly less successful change and transformation programmes. So, the peer teams' message to the council is that it should use this sound foundation to now drive positive leadership and modelling right across the officer team. Both councils are in a strong position to positively look forward and leave the past behind.

With the above in mind, it is also positive to see the councils taking action to develop managers of the future e.g. the line management development pathway. The next steps we would advise is to build upon this by considering a similar approach in relation to aspiring leaders e.g. head of service

As said, there is now a sound evidence base and track record of achievement to enable the council to stop looking back and instead project forward with pride and ambition. The council's staff survey results are reflecting positively on the investment in more effective leadership. Likewise, from our engagement with officers on site, and what we read and heard from others, it is equally evident that staff engagement has improved. The way the council's senior leadership team has listened and responded to staff has been well received and this has been further demonstrated by the reinvigoration of the 'Engage' staff forum. The emerging and recently updated organisational development plan recognises the value the councils place upon its workforce. The opportunities to work flexibly, to develop careers, to work in a welcoming and smart office space – these are all signs of the underlying substance that builds staff commitment and makes them know they are valued.

The evidence of the above can be seen through how service performance improves. The investment and changes made in the planning team and the value of the service review undertaken in that area can be easily demonstrated by the improvement in planning performance and a reinvestment and belief in the importance of having a professionally led, policy driven but responsive service. Interestingly those improvements in planning that were clear to the peer team have been less clear as of yet to other interested stakeholders. This is a further example where a new narrative from the council should be helpful.

4.3 Governance and culture

The council's work, ahead, through and beyond the change of control has been exemplary. The new political administration is developing well, and officers have effectively supported the transition. Managing changes of control of political administrations, particularly when one has been in place for an extended period, is no easy feat. The work done through and especially after the May elections, with all political groups, ensuring there was both appropriate lines of communication in place and establishing effective briefing and sharing information arrangements, has reaped its rewards. This has all been achieved through hard work and co-operation between all political groups and the highly respected officer team covering both councils.

Collaborative decision making and building trust and confidence through consensus has been the hallmarks of the establishment of the new 'West Devon Alliance' administration. The peer team saw good cross-party consensus-based decision making. Leading in a political alliance requires specific skill sets and time and energy to build the trust and confidence needed to succeed; in respect of this the leader and deputy leader are doing this well and it was very positive to see the council's political leadership purposefully prioritising the talent and experience of its wider membership over political allegiances.

In line with the above the council's Hub, which drives the change agenda at WDBC is supported by advisory groups – informal forums for developing policy and also a sounding board for agenda items, chaired by the lead members. When the peer team spoke with members across all political groups it was clear that whilst the existing arrangements had achieved its aims of engaging members, it was, as one stakeholder said 'fuzzy'. A year into the new arrangements a reflection on the on the role, function and purpose of these groups would be wise with a focus on clarifying the outputs and outcomes from them. This should help WDBC to make the best use of this process and its member resource and this in turn should enable them to more positively influence the Hub activity and work programme. Clearly such arrangements should be considered with reference to the wider governance arrangements, but importantly we were told that overall the broader committee arrangements are working well with members appreciating cross party working and they feel involved in decisions but at the same time offering them appropriate opportunities to hold the Hub to account

As already outlined, the leader has set the tone to encourage member development

by engaging very early with the LGA National Leadership Programme and is a great advocate for members developing their knowledge and skills set to enable them to make their contribution at the council count. We heard from members that there had been good early engagement around member development, and they were complimentary about the support they had received through their induction. A year on is a good opportunity to refresh and refocus on the wants and needs of members and how, now that the council plan is clearly developed and its community aspirations are developing, that any further development can prioritise how members can make their contribution count around these key issues and reflecting on what members feel they need in terms of support and development. The peer team recommended that both councils considered developing a rolling 4-year member development programme that will meet the needs to members as they gain experience.

As referenced throughout this report there is a strong and effective culture of respect across both WDBC and SHDC and the peer team found both good member and officer relations and member to member relations across both councils. This is equally evidenced by the views of partners, staff, members and external audit. Given the above, and the peer teams observations in respect of performance management, it is evident that both councils have good and effective governance and a strong and progressive culture. Again, in line with the general thrust of the peer teams views, such foundations should enable the councils to look forward and grow from strength to strength.

4.4 Financial planning and management

WDBC has an excellent track record for sound financial stewardship and leadership. The small but very experienced finance team that supports both councils are a credit to their profession and their councils. Year on year they sustain the confidence of members, external auditors and now the LGA peer challenge team. They are very well respected by all the relevant stakeholders we spoke with and that good financial stewardship over time creates trust from which that confidence can develop. At WDBC this is reflected in a series of strong performance indicators, including very high council tax collection and time and again consistently well above the median when compared to their near neighbours on financial performance - see headline

report.

The council has a net budget for 2024/25 of £9.5m and comparatively speaking is currently in a relatively good financial position. The shared staffing arrangements which are such an underpinning strength in making both WDBC and SHDC more resilient and efficient, is evidenced through the £6.2m of annual on-going shared services savings (£2.3m for West Devon and £3.9m for South Hams).

The council has in place a rolling three-year medium term financial strategy (MTFS) where future budget gaps and saving requirements are clearly laid out. The council has a track record for achieving the savings it has historically identified and once more, that builds confidence, not just in the finance team, but as importantly the member oversight and the senior officer leadership. From reviewing both council meetings and associated papers, the peer team saw evidence through the Hub, Audit and Governance and other relevant committees of clear reporting and effective budget monitoring. This view is also evidenced by the external auditor, who at the time of the peer challenge had just provided a very positive and unqualified opinion for the council's 2022/23 accounts and an equally positive value for money statement.

As described, that attention to addressing budget pressures and challenges and clear collective ownership is very evident at WDBC. For 2023/24 the council was forecasting an underspend of £159k (1.9% of budget). We saw this throughout the council including at heads of service level who were actively seeking to find and keep on track, the identified 'gap' for 2025/26 and indeed over the rolling three-year period. The peer team saw that this was firstly on track, but also importantly that budget managers were not complacent in respect of future challenges, such as the redirection of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund post 2025.

As already outlined, members and officers at both councils have worked together to align funding to new council plan priorities, in WDBC's case there had been a reallocation/alignment of circa £1.1m as part of this exercise, which followed a review of all earmarked reserves and the council's capital programme.

We also saw some good examples of effectively funding council priorities through external funding bodies e.g. the community forest funding already referred to the recruitment of wildlife wardens.

In terms of future financial modelling, we saw that positive uplifts that stabilise MTFs were clear e.g. council tax income from new homes etc. However, we were less clear about how both councils were modelling the future housing growth cost pressures that will also inevitably exist and we would encourage both councils to reflect on this.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

The peer team has rightly praised both councils in respect of aligning the council plans, the MTFs, and the delivery plans that sit beneath them. This means WDBC and SHDC are both clear they have the organisational capacity within and across its staff group to deliver the current plans. Whilst acknowledging the real strength in this, the peer teams challenge is the obvious one about being realistic in recognising that this means there will also be capacity limitations, should new and different challenges present and WDBC will need to be very aware of this.

During the CPC the peer team met with staff and members across the two councils focussing on cross cutting priorities. That demonstrated to the peer team how effective officer and member working arrangements can create capacity, dynamism and a real desire to progress change. It also showed how the councils effectively use matrix management arrangements in helping to deliver against key priority areas such as the natural environment. The great benefits we saw that is derived from these could also be applied to some of the community development work that we have highlighted that would benefit from greater focus.

There is now opportunity to build a new sense of identity for the workforce built upon the good practice and positive foundations identified by the peer team, and to continue to grow the skills that are already emerging. The councils have a strong bedrock from which to enable greater collective corporate leadership and the development of cross-organisational dialogue, understanding and approaches. This will explicitly demonstrate to people internal and external that they are being heard and responded to.

The chief executive has led a change of organisational culture which is valued and recognised across the organisation by staff, managers and members. The senior leadership team demonstrate the values and behaviours of a positive and empowering organisational culture, and this lead is followed throughout all the layers

and levels of the workforce. The peer team met with staff who were very proud to work for the council and equally proud of their beautiful borough. That is further evidenced through the ever-improving feedback that the council is receiving through its staff survey, which it has recently carried out. When prompted, staff who met with the peer team were clear about when the appraisal cycle of the councils would take place, how that will be conducted etc, essentially reinforcing the 'golden thread' messages from earlier in this report.

The council recognises the importance of modern and flexible technology solutions as key foundations for improving the customer experience, service efficiency and effectiveness and evidenced a strong track record of exploiting technology to drive improvements.

The senior officer team is a strong and stable one these last 4 years or so, and it is one that remains focussed on serving the needs of residents and ever improving the reputation of the councils and its staff group.

We heard positive comments about the ever-increasing effectiveness of the council's communication team and that was very heartening. The peer team felt that the next steps for both councils to take was to refine and amplify the story of improvement, focussing on that strong messaging in respect of community engagement. Aligned to this we strongly advise the council to look at ways through which others across the sector are building that community engagement and social capital emphasise to all they do; a specific mention was made of as one of several approaches to consider. Given the peer teams references to capacity, we also wondered whether the council could create some additional temporary resource to accelerate this work.

It was refreshing to see the council's organisational development plan, and many of the positive approaches and actions that lie at the heart of this. It reflects the characteristics of a 'being fit for now' local authority. But that readiness will understandably be tested with the real potential for change within the sector. The council may wish to consider the next iteration of the organisational development plan as a 'people strategy' for the medium term. Throughout the many meetings with staff, it was evident that everyone wants to give their best with high volumes of discretionary energy being exercised. There is a strong 'one team' ethos that runs through the organisation across both members and officers and there is a clear

sense of pride in all they do. Everyone wants to deliver the best outcomes for their communities. The commitment is an impressive component to organisational culture and a sound foundation for the development of a people strategy with a set of values at its core.

Therefore, the peer teams challenge to the councils is once more to build upon this current readiness by taking steps to map both WDBC's and SHDC's individual and collective needs, but also the wider Devon and sector needs too, over the course of the next 2/3 years to ensure that both councils are 'fit for the future' and the staff group are best placed to maximise those opportunities and address potential challenges.

The senior leadership team clearly own and lead a progressive approach to equality and diversity and demonstrate a willingness to get under the skin of what this agenda means to WDBC/SHDC workforce and councillors. It was equally positive to see the council taking the important step of convening an equality and diversity engagement group to co-design the pathway to further developing inclusive councils. The next suggested step is to ensure the equalities and diversity agenda is 'lived and breathed' by the entire cohort of leaders. The council has a clear desire to improve and should take the opportunity to build on excellent recent work to articulate what matters to WDBC in this agenda, to co-produce a holistic equalities and, diversity plan and set of actions. The inclusive culture that the leadership team is already developing provides a strong foundation from which they can build and a productive environment for this work to be successful.

The programme of service-based reviews has clearly delivered well managed organisational change, witness the improvements in the waste and planning services for example. This approach has been led very positively by the chief executive and is very well engaged with and owned by teams in the council, which is somewhat in contrast to a previous 'big bang' organisational change programme. The focus now is on continuous improvement and there has been a commitment to no large-scale transformation as the council has worked to mitigate the impacts (internally and externally) of previous such programmes.

It's time now for the council to really build upon the approaches that have

characterised change and improvement at WDBC and SHDC these last 4 years and not to shy away from the very valid work and direction of travel in respect of both councils' values and behaviours. We found that they were clearly present in the recruitment process but more passive in tone when people were brought into the organisation – we saw them embodied through actions but not so clearly articulated verbally or indeed as reminders in posters or publications. Actions do speak louder than words but the reinforcement of the values and behaviours in word is important and we encourage the councils to be proud of them. Again, the councils will be doing this from a position of strength, where the values have been built with staff and not imposed. Previous change programmes may have led the councils to shy away from this, but they are now in a very different position, and it is time to really look ahead and embrace those values as they will be the very things that helps the councils, and its staff best navigate the challenges and opportunities ahead.


The peer team enjoyed their time working with and challenging WDBC . We saw the core components of a 'learning organisation' coming together, with well evidenced opportunities for staff to shape priorities, delivery and culture. Members and officers have engaged with LGA Leadership Academy, Peer Challenges etc and are looking outwards to draw learning and experience from right across the sector.

As such the peer teams final reflections is that WDBC and SHDC are in a very strong place. The councils have both singular and a collective joint strong core, through their staffing group. Through this and the progressive plans and actions of the political leadership, it is clear West Devon Borough Council is in a good position to navigate future challenges and changes in Devon, the region and the local government sector as a whole.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a Progress Review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the Progress Review report on their website.

The Progress Review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to



peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC Action Plan. The Progress Review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

The date for the Progress Review at West Devon Borough Council will be no later than January 2025.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

paul.clarke@local.gov.uk.

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Report to: **Hub Committee**

Date: **11 June 2024**

Title: **Productivity Plan**

Portfolio Area: **Cllr Mandy Ewings**
Leader West Devon Borough Council

Wards Affected: **All**

Author: **Lisa Buckle** Role: **Director of Strategic Finance (S151)**

Contact: Directors@swdevon.gov.uk

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Hub Committee:

- 1. APPROVE the content and publication of the West Devon Productivity Plan at Appendix A; and**
- 2. DELEGATE any minor amendments to the Director of Finance, in consultation with the Leader of Council, ahead of submission to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities by the deadline of 19th July 2024.**

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 When the Local Government Finance Settlement was published in late 2023, it included a Government requirement for Councils to publish a Productivity Plan. In April 2024, further guidance was received from Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities setting out the requirements for the plan.
- 1.2 This report sets out the Productivity Plan for West Devon Borough Council which must be submitted to Government by 19th July 2024 and also published on the Council's website.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Government is reviewing productivity across all public services. As part of the recent Local Government Finance Settlement, all Councils are being asked to produce productivity plans. The plans will help the Government to understand what is already working well across the whole country, what the common themes are and whether there are any gaps and what more the Government needs to do to unlock future opportunities.

- 2.2 The expectation is that the Plans should be short (around a few pages) although there is no set format or template which the productivity plan has to adhere to. The Government has suggested that the Productivity Plan includes some of the four main areas below:-
- Transformation of services to make better use of resources;
 - Opportunities to take advantage of advances in technology and make better use of data to inform decision making and service design;
 - Ways to reduce wasteful spending within all Councils; and
 - Identify any barriers that currently impact efficiency that the Government could help to reduce or remove.
- 2.3 In March 2024, the Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) which forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of sector-led improvement put in place by Councils and the Local Government Association (LGA), to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. ***The CPC concluded that 'West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and is delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities.'***
- 2.4 West Devon Borough Council and its neighbouring Council, South Hams District Council, have pioneered an innovative **shared services partnership** which started in 2007 with a shared workforce and integrated systems and processes across both Districts. This is generating **annual on-going savings worth £6.2million** to West Devon and South Hams compared to a traditional model, demonstrating excellent value for money. This has enabled the Councils to protect frontline services and no services to communities have been removed.
- 2.5 The CPC stated that it is this joint working that is at the heart of a highly productive organisation. Both Councils have a proven track record of **strong financial management and strategic financial planning**, which has ensured their financial sustainability and resilience, particularly in the face of unprecedented reductions in Government funding. Since 2009/10, the Council's core Government funding has been reduced by £3million per annum, equating to over 31% of the Council's Net Budget for 2024/25 of £9.5m.

- 2.6 The Council has a strong track record in all of the areas set out in the Productivity Plan, which has been endorsed by consistently good value for money assessments by our External Auditors and West Devon has been recognised **as a high performing Council** by the recent LGA Peer Challenge which stated, **“West Devon Borough Council has an excellent track record of financial management and planning, which is one of its underpinning core strengths”**.
- 2.7 We feel that these assessments by sector experts demonstrate that West Devon Borough Council is already delivering against the requirements set by the Secretary of State which we have evidenced within our Productivity Plan (Appendix A).
- 2.8 Within the plan, we have set out a number of areas where we feel Government can support us to further increase productivity including:-
- Removal of prescriptive regulation which specifies input measures and operational processes – stifling innovation and better outcomes;
 - Incentivising investment in new green infrastructure and affordable housing by introducing discounted borrowing rates;
 - Providing a multi-year financial settlement to enable greater ability for longer-term planning by local authorities; and
 - Ringfencing second homes council tax premium for local affordable homes.
- The full requests can be seen in Appendix A.
- 2.9 The Productivity Plans will be considered by a new productivity review panel, made up of sector experts including the Office for Local Government and the Local Government Association.

3. Next Steps

- 3.1 The Hub Committee is asked to consider the Productivity Plan at Appendix A and approve the content and publication of the Productivity Plan. It is also recommended that the Hub Committee delegate to the Director of Finance to make any minor amendments to the Productivity Plan arising through the meeting.
- 3.2 The Productivity Plan will be submitted to Government by the deadline of 19th July 2024 and published on the Council’s website.

4. Implications

| Implications | Relevant to proposals Y/N | Details and proposed measures to address |
|--|---------------------------|---|
| Legal/Governance | | There is a requirement for all Councils to submit a Productivity Plan to the Government (DLUHC) by 19 th July 2024. |
| Financial implications to include reference to value for money | | <p>The Productivity Plan sets out the value for money measures already implemented by West Devon Borough Council and any further areas of focus.</p> <p>West Devon Borough Council and its neighbouring Council, South Hams District Council have pioneered an innovative shared services partnership which started in 2007 with a shared workforce and integrated systems and processes across both Districts. This is generating annual on-going savings worth £6.2million to West Devon and South Hams compared to a traditional model, demonstrating excellent value for money. This has enabled the Councils to protect frontline services and no services to communities have been removed.</p> |
| Risk | | There are no direct risk implications as a result of this report. |
| Council Plan contribution | | All |
| Consultation & Engagement Strategy | | The Productivity Plan does not require consultation or engagement however it must be published on the Council's website. |
| Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact | | No climate and biodiversity impact as a result of this report. |
| Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications | | |
| Equality and Diversity | | NA |
| Safeguarding | | NA |
| Community Safety, Crime and Disorder | | NA |
| Health, Safety and Wellbeing | | NA |
| Other implications | | NA |

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Appendix A: - West Devon Borough Council Productivity Plan 2024

Background Papers:
None

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West Devon
Borough Council

Productivity Plan

2024-25



Introduction

West Devon is an incredibly special and important place, home to a World Heritage Site, bustling market towns and the stunning moorland of Dartmoor. There are however challenges.

There is a serious lack of affordable housing in West Devon which creates a real challenge for ordinary working people and has an impact on the local economy. We have an ageing population with all the care and support needs that entails. There are pockets of deprivation as well as issues of rural isolation and loneliness.

The council welcomes external challenge and support which informs our thinking to innovate and to continually improve. The council has a history of good external audit opinions and audited accounts published on time.

In March 2024, the council had an external review undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA), which concluded that ...

“West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and is delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities.”

➤ Peer Challenge Position Statement March 2024

➤ LGA Peer Challenge Feedback Report

57,100

population

22,590

households

1,161km²

Least populated Authority in the South West

A track record of innovation and efficiency in delivery

West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) and its neighbour, South Hams District Council have pioneered an innovative shared services partnership which started in 2007.

The partnership comprises a shared workforce and integrated systems and processes – effectively we have one organisation supporting two councils.

This generates on-going savings of £6.2million a year, which is shared between the two councils demonstrating excellent value for money. This has enabled the councils to protect core services and respond to the needs of our communities. The review team recognised the critical importance of these arrangements, and concluded ...

“it is this joint working that is at the heart of a highly productive organisation”.

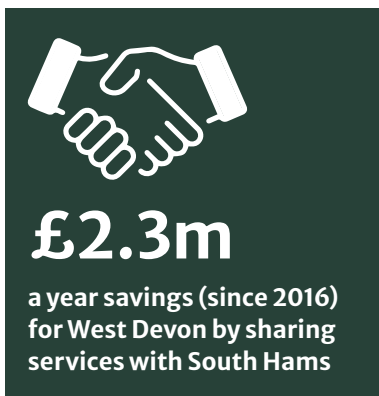
We embrace continuous improvement, and all members of our senior leadership team have undertaken reviews of other councils as part of the LGA corporate peer challenge process. The examples of best practice gathered, and imparted, through the process has ensured we continue to challenge and improve our own practice and remain on the cutting edge of local government thinking.

Since 2021 we have reviewed and realigned services to provide clarity of purpose, strong and effective managerial leadership and clear alignment with our key aims, priorities and clear ownership and responsibility for service performance.

This incremental approach to **service reviews** means we have been able to avoid the ‘big bang’ organisational paralysis that can occur with larger restructures and local government reorganisations and focus on our core purposes, which is how we can deliver cost-effective, reliable and easily accessible services for our residents.

Each year the senior leadership of the organisation challenges service plans and encourages identification of efficiency savings while continuing to improve service delivery. Planning ahead for 2025/26 we have already identified efficiencies amounting to over £0.6m across both Councils.

In addition, for the 2024/25 year we have been able to realign resources and invest an additional £347,000 in our priorities for housing, climate response and economy. This investment at a time where many councils are having to make cuts and reduce services.



Technology and Data

85%

of transactions are now online

The council recognises the importance of modern and flexible technology solutions as key foundations for improving the customer experience, service efficiency and effectiveness and evidenced a strong track record of exploiting technology to drive improvements.

75%

★★★★★
★★★★☆

of customers rate us four or five stars for online processes

WDBC has utilised technology effectively for many years. This is reflected in a sustained drive to support a 'digital-first' approach, which is more convenient for many service users, while retaining other contact methods for those with complex needs. This approach continues to drive cashable savings, while ensuring responsive services. Online customer satisfaction is high.

In the last few years, we have implemented 'low-code' solutions for our case management systems giving us greater control and flexibility over our customer online interactions, reducing the need for reliance on expensive IT consultants and change requests. We can now build our own online processes and amend them regularly based on customer feedback to ensure we offer the best possible service.

Financial Management and stewardship

£3m

per annum reduction in government funding since 2009/10 (31% of 24/25 budget) with no cuts to services.

The council has a proven track record of **strong financial management and strategic financial planning**, which has ensured its financial sustainability and resilience, particularly in the face of unprecedented reductions in Government funding.

The 2022/23 external Auditor's Annual Report concluded that:

'We are satisfied that the council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.'

and

'the Council continues to perform well with regard to financial sustainability, with a record of stable financial and budgetary management. Despite the challenging environment in which it continued to operate in during 2021/22 and 2022/23, the Council has achieved a balanced budget. Our work has not identified any significant weaknesses in arrangements to secure financial stability.'

We've delivered underspends in each of the last three financial years of between 1-2% of the revenue base budget.

➤ Grant Thornton 22/23 Auditors Annual report

98.37%

Council Tax collection rate
(26th highest of 181 Councils)

97.79%

Business Rates Collection
Rates 23/24
(23rd highest of 181 Councils)

For 2023–24 the council is predicting a revenue budget underspend of £159,000 (1.9% of the total Budget of £8.588m) as a result of active management of the council's finances.

The Council Plan, which is supported by a fully costed delivery plan, sets out the key aims and actions that the council will deliver for the next four years. We have a council plan, a matching finance plan and most recently a delivery plan to help ensure the council keeps on track – all of these key building blocks create a positive culture of continuous improvement.

The council has successfully secured Levelling Up Funding (LUF) monies for a new railway station and integrated transport hub in Okehampton, a collaboration between WDBC, DCC, Network Rail and GWR. The council would not have achieved this had they not already had in place a trusted, strong partnership between DCC at both member and senior officer level.

Future Plans for efficiency and effectiveness

392

Core staff shared with
South Hams

West Devon Borough Council has a strong framework of corporate governance and performance management which is reflected in very positive external audit findings and seen in the council's integrated performance management reporting process, which regularly reports on progress against our strategic objectives.

➤ **Organisational
Development Plan**

An **organisational development plan** was launched by the council in February 2023 which set out our commitment and a long-term vision for how we will 'lead, manager, support and develop' our employees.

Our plan includes:-

- Reviewing our pay and reward strategy – benchmarking technical and professional pay rates to ensure we remain competitive as an employer
- Delivering a comprehensive manager development programme to ensure managers have the skills to lead good quality council services.
- A review of operational structures to ensure clear ownership, accountability and responsibility for service delivery

This continual investment in our workforce has meant that we have not had a significant reliance on expensive external consultants or agency staff.

Barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove

We were disappointed that the Government rejected the House of Lords amendment to the upcoming Devon Devolution Deal which would have allowed district councils to be constituent members of the Combined County Authority with full voting rights.

We intend to lobby a future Government to rectify this democratic deficit and to maximise opportunities for Devons Districts to benefit from the deal.

In terms of how central government could be more productive and implement changes to assist local government in this area, we would recommend the following:

... We intend to lobby a future Government to rectify this democratic deficit and to maximise opportunities.

- Government departments should follow the example of local authorities, such as WDBC and SHDC, by exploring opportunities for sharing management and staff to better support placed based decision making.
- Implement financial rewards and additional freedoms for councils which have achieved embedded levels of integration and shared working.
- Remove prescriptive regulation which specifies input measures and operational processes, and stifles innovation, which delivers better outcomes at less costs e.g. requiring councils to collect recyclables and residual waste from every property every 2 weeks, when in ultra rural areas community composting and recycling arrangements would reduce waste, deliver services at lower cost and make big CO2 savings.
- Maximise the use of new technology – by removing outdated processes from all regulations e.g. all notices to be published online, and use of ANPR for parking enforcement.
- Create a stable financial planning environment for local government, so it can plan for the medium-term, including:
 - multi-year financial settlement to provide certainty and enable future planning.

- removing Council Tax referendum limits.
- ability to set our own level of planning fees.
- allowing affected areas to introduce a tourism tax e.g. bed night tax to go back into supporting the visitor economy.
- ringfencing second homes council tax premium for local housing authorities to reinvest in local affordable homes.
- ending competitive bidding for funding (UKSPF etc).
- additional funding to meet ever increasing costs of temporary accommodation – with temporary accommodation rate being increase in line with the LHA.
- additional funding for Local Authorities to help meet the increasing threat of cyber-attacks which have a direct impact on our ability to deliver services.
- Incentivise investment in new green infrastructure and affordable housing by introducing a discounted PWLB borrowing rate available to all local authorities for investment in housing and associated infrastructure regardless of whether they have a housing revenue account. Also offering discounted borrowing for infrastructure investment which delivers on the Net zero 2050 target. And by removing windfall profits from the sale of agricultural land for housing.

Conclusion

The council has an excellent track record of financial management and planning, which is one of its underpinning core strengths. This is not our conclusion, but that of the Local Government Association peer challenge team.

The strength of the shared services partnership with South Hams District Council and the levels of savings and value for money that has delivered (over £6m annually), is a testament to how the councils have been innovative and pioneered this successful operating model for the benefit of its residents, businesses and the community.

Our incremental approach to service redesign ensures that we continue to deliver needed services while achieving further efficiencies.



Report to: **Hub Committee**

Date: **11 June 2024**

Title: **Cost of Living Crisis: Plans for Household Support Fund Allocation (1 April to 30 September 2024) and 12-Month Review of the Revenues and Benefits Service.**

Portfolio Area: **Cllr J Elliott – Community Wellbeing**

Wards Affected: **All**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: Immediately following this meeting.

Author: **Geni Hotchkiss** Role: **Head of Revenues and Benefits**

Contact: **geni.hotchkiss@swdevon.gov.uk**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is RECOMMENDED that the Hub Committee instructs the Head of Revenues and Benefits to:

- 1. take immediate steps to progress support payments of £500 to Devon County Council Care Leavers known to be living at an address in the Borough on 1 June 2024.**
- 2. take steps to progress support payments of £500 to Devon Care Leavers newly notified by Devon County Council to be living at an address in the Borough between 2 June and 30 September 2024.**
- 3. release the balance of the Household Support Fund for an open application process until 30 September 2024 or until the fund is fully spent, if sooner.**
- 4. to note the progress made by the Revenues and Benefits Service in the last 12 months.**
- 5. to note the intention to create a new post of Cost Of Living Support Officer (shared with South Hams District Council) to provide financial support, advice and signposting to residents.**

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 On 6 March 2024, in the Spring Budget, the Chancellor announced that the Household Support Fund (HSF) would be extended for a further 6 months, from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 with a further £421m of funding.
- 1.2 Devon County Council has been provided with funding of £5m by the Department for Work and Pensions for a Household Support Fund (1 April to 30 September 2024).
- 1.3 Following the pattern of previous Household Support Fund Schemes, Devon County Council has provided districts with an allocation based on Universal Credit uptake. For West Devon this is £125,045.
- 1.4 The funding is intended to support who households would otherwise struggle to buy food, pay essential utility bills or meet other essential living costs.
- 1.5 A variety of support options have been considered, including providing further support to some of the households who received direct support previously. This included families and single income households receiving council tax reduction, war pensioners and those with caring responsibilities and disabilities. Due to the short term nature of the funding and a desire to get funding out to households as quickly as possible, the recommended options strike a balance between providing targeted support to certain individuals (Devon care leavers) and the opportunity to apply for support through an application process.
- 1.6 The report also provides an update on the progress made by the Revenues and Benefits Service in the last 12 months following the service review. The priorities for the service for 2024/25 are also set out within the report.

2. Background

Household Support Fund (April to September 2024)

- 2.1 Devon County Council has been provided with funding of £5m by the Department for Work and Pensions for a Household Support Fund (1 April to 30 September 2024).
- 2.2 The funding is intended to support households who would otherwise struggle to buy food or pay essential utility bills or meet other essential living costs or housing costs (in exceptional cases of genuine emergency) and to help them with living costs.

- 2.3 The Council's allocation is £125,045 which is based on the Universal Credit uptake for West Devon. The Council can provide direct and targeted financial help and assistance to households who we have identified through existing datasets to be vulnerable and struggling financially to secure food, water and energy as well as operating an open application-based scheme.
- 2.4 Household Support Fund 4 saw the Council receive a larger allocation due to it covering the whole financial year. Household Support Fund 3 saw the Council support 717 households with a total spend of £124,407 and Household Support Fund 4 enabled the Council to support 1,193 households from its allocation of £248,814. The support provided through Household Support Fund 4 is shown in the table below.

| | Households with children | Households with pensioners | Households with a disabled person | Other households | Total |
|------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Spend (£s) | £65,947 | £8,290 | £38,457 | £136,120 | £248,814 |
| Number | 318 | 41 | 175 | 659 | 1,193 |

- 2.5 Team Devon have agreed that Devon care leavers (i.e. people who have received care in Devon) who are in receipt of a council tax discretionary discount and/or council tax reduction will be included in the Council's priority group to receive support and assistance.
- 2.6 The Council wishes to take this further as not all care leavers are liable for council tax and we have a moral imperative to do our best for looked after children and care leavers. We can do this by acting in a way a good parent would, by providing them the necessary care and support to help them reach their full potential. We will therefore include all Devon care leavers residing in the West Devon as a cohort the Council wishes to support through a direct payment.
- 2.7 Officers have undertaken some initial analysis from existing datasets to identify care leavers the Council is already aware through the Devon-wide work on the council tax discretionary discount scheme. This figure includes care leavers who, due to their individual circumstances, may not be liable for council tax. These currently total 17, however we estimate that we may be notified of further care leavers through the monthly update reports, and it is therefore prudent to estimate that we may support up to 25 care leavers until the end of the current Household Support Fund in September 2024.

- 2.8 It is recommended to Members that we make a targeted support payment of £500 to all Devon care leavers we are currently aware of, by the end of June 2024. If we are notified of further Devon care leavers in the period to 30 September 2024, we will make a £500 support payment to them within 15 working days of the notification.
- 2.9 In formulating these recommendations, the Council has decided to focus most of its allocation on an open application-based scheme. This means the Council will be able to support a broad range of households in a timely manner.
- 2.10 Whilst there are other cohorts the Council could provide further support to using existing datasets, we have already provided support to families and single income households receiving council tax reduction, war pensioners, carers and residents with disabilities through previous schemes.
- 2.11 As the scheme will only run for 6 months, the recommendation is that the Council uses the bulk of its funding for an open application scheme, which means we will be able to deliver support to vulnerable households based on demonstrable need and as soon as possible. After support has been given to care leavers, it is estimated that the amount available for the open application process will be approximately £112,000.

12 - Month Review of the Revenues and Benefits Service

- 2.12 Following the appointment of a Head of Revenues and Benefits in September 2022, SLT agreed proposals for the restructure of the team. The primary objective of the new structure is to ensure that the Council is delivering the best possible services to residents and businesses in the most efficient and effective way.
- 2.13 The Revenues and Benefits Service Review – Staff Consultation was shared with the team in May 2023. After the consultation period, the new staffing structure went live on 1 September 2023.
- 2.14 The Devon Audit Partnership (DAP) has recently undertaken audits of Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefit. For Council Tax and Business Rates, the audit opinion has improved from 'Limited Assurance' to 'Reasonable Assurance.' This is a substantial achievement of the revenues and benefits team and is the result of a significant amount of work to implement previous years' recommendations and make significant progress and improvements. These internal audit opinions and reports will be presented by DAP to the next meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee in July 2024.

- 2.15 For Housing Benefit the audit opinion of 'Reasonable Assurance' has remained unchanged when compared to previous audits, however it should be noted that the level of assurance has increased to 'Substantial Assurance' for the implementation of previous recommendations.

3. Outcomes/outputs

Household Support Fund (April to September 2024)

- 3.1 The expectation is that the Household Support Fund will be used to support households in the most need. There are no DWP funding targets in terms of supporting certain cohorts of the population, but there is an expectation that support is offered for the duration of the funding period. At least part of the scheme must be on an open application basis.
- 3.2 As part of the funding arrangements, the Council is required to provide management information to Devon County Council on the delivery of the fund. This will in turn be used by the County Council to inform the Department for Work and Pensions on the speed and effectiveness of delivery. Authorities are also required to make it clear in any publicity material for the scheme, including via online channels and media releases, that the funding is being provided by the UK Government.
- 3.3 Getting funding out to residents in need as quickly as possible is a key measure of success and throughout the delivery of all Government schemes over the last few years, the Council has a proven track record in this area.

Revenues and Benefits Service – 2023/24

Customer Service

- 3.4 The new Revenues and Benefits structure has the team answering all telephone calls in a consistent and knowledgeable manner meeting the requirements of our customers. By ensuring advice is given and all relevant information is obtained at the first point of contact, we avoid double handling and increase levels of customer satisfaction.
- 3.5 Whilst we will always support those residents and businesses who do need to contact the Council by telephone, there is more work to be done in 2024/25 on maximising online services, automation and channel shift opportunities. The team have therefore been set a target of reducing the overall number of calls by 5% in 2024/25.

One-off activities delivered in 2023/24

3.6 Below is a summary of some of the one-off activities undertaken by the team in the last 12 months which has either provided support to residents or contributed to the Council's on-going financial sustainability:

- Energy Bills Support Scheme (Alternative Funding) – 216 households who do not have a direct relationship with an energy supplier were supported with their energy costs. This included park home residents and self-funding residents in care homes.
- Domestic Alternative Fuel Payment (Alternative Fund) – 305 households who are not on the mains gas grid and use an alternative fuel (such as heating oil) for heating, supported with a £200 payment towards their energy costs.
- Single Person Discount Review – the Devon County Council funded Single Person Discount Review saw the removal of 281 single person discounts. It is estimated that this will result in additional income of £141,000 with West Devon Borough Council keeping 11% (approximately £15,000).
- Continued work on identifying renewable energy sites, allowing West Devon Borough Council to retain all the business rates windfall income from these sites of £215,836 in 2023/24, in accordance with legislation (without having to share this business rates income with other preceptors and Central Government in the normal way).

3.7 Revenues and Benefits is a statutory service with all activities underpinned by legislation and best practice which can frequently change. To ensure the service is delivered fairly, consistently and correctly, several policies were reviewed and updated in 2023/24 as follows:

- Amendment to the March 2023 Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rates and Housing Benefits Overpayments Policy to incorporate a section on sundry debt.
- Discretionary Rate Relief Policy.
- Corporate Debt Policy.
- Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.

Housing Benefit and Discretionary Housing Payments

- 3.8 Housing Benefit supports residents who are on a low income with paying their rent. Whilst it is still the Government's intention to migrate most working age people receiving legacy benefits to Universal Credit, the team continued to administer a caseload of 1,430 claimants in 2023/24. The team processed:
- 193 new claims for Housing Benefit.
 - 5,489 changes in circumstances.
 - 180 Discretionary Housing Payments totalling £127,233 which supported residents with on-going rental costs or provided help to move to alternative accommodation.
- 3.9 Performance is reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committee and it is expected that the Council's performance will be better than the national average with new claims generally being processed within 12 days and changes in circumstances in 5.7 days. The national average changes every quarter and in the last published quarter, which was quarter 3, the national average figures for England were 18 days for new claims and 8 days for changes in circumstances. The speed of processing of the team is helping our customers receive the right amount of benefit in as timely a manner as possible.

Collection rates and outstanding debt

- 3.10 In the Revenues and Benefits Service Review Update paper considered by Hub Committee in April 2022, it was noted that the new Head of Revenues and Benefits would have specific and stretching targets to improve collection rates for each of the next 3 years. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in relation to collection rates are reported to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on a regular basis.

Council Tax

- 3.11 The Council is required to complete a Government return (QRC4) in early May which collects data nationally on council tax and non-domestic rates income. This return is used to calculate the Council's collection performance compared to the rest of the country. It is anticipated that the 2023/24 collection rate of 98.3% will keep the Council in the top quartile nationally.
- 3.12 In 2022/23 the Council achieved top quartile performance for Council Tax collection and the Council was ranked 26th highest out of 181 District Councils. We were also ranked 13th out of 72 predominantly rural Councils.
- 3.13 It should also be noted that the net collectable debit for council tax income which the Council must collect increased from £48.2m

in 2022/23 to £51.5m in 2023/24. The Council is the Billing Authority and is therefore required to bill and collect council tax income for WDBC and all the other preceptors (Devon County Council, Police, Fire and Town and Parish Councils). The Council retains 11% of all council tax income to fund its services. The rest is passed onto DCC, the Police, the Fire, and Towns and Parishes, to fund the services which they provide.

- 3.14 The latest internal audit report on Debt Management stated that 'The Council has a good focus on debt collection.' The current level of Council Tax debt is £4.7m, however this needs to be considered in the context of the latest annual amount of council tax billed by WDBC being £51.5m.
- 3.15 It should also be noted that the team capacity to collect income was impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic years with the focus shifting to supporting businesses through the administration of business grants (over £33.5m was administered and paid to businesses in West Devon).
- 3.16 The last 12 months have continued to be challenging for the Revenues team due to the volume of work and difficulties being experienced in collecting debt due to the impact of the cost of living crisis on people's income. Having said that, more structure has been embedded with a focus on overall management of the team, performance management and management of work. The team are also taking a more proactive approach to collect both in year and historic debt and preventative measures are now in place to ensure individual debt does not build up.

Business Rates

- 3.17 One of the key objectives of the new Revenues and Benefits structure was to increase capacity in relation to the billing, collection and enforcement of business rates. This decision has enabled the team to provide better and more consistent support to ratepayers, however in 2023/24 collection performance was impacted significantly by one debtor who owed £128,000 at year end. This meant that the Council achieved a collection rate of 97.78%. The Council is the Billing Authority for business rates and collects around £9m, of which the Council retained £1.96m in 2023/24, the equivalent of around 22% of all income collected.
- 3.18 For business rates we achieved top quartile performance in 2022/23 and the Council was ranked 23rd highest out of 181 District councils. We were also 8th out of 72 predominantly rural Councils with a collection rate of 98.95%.
- 3.19 The latest internal audit report on Debt Management stated that 'The Council has a good focus in debt collection. The current level of debt for business rates at 31 March 2024 is £1.2m, however this

should be seen in the context of the annual amount of business rates being billed by WDBC being £9m. Again, more proactive action is being taken by the team in collecting current and aged debt.

4. Proposed Way Forward

Household Support Fund (April to September 2024)

- 4.1 The recommendations in this report will provide support in different ways to individuals and households, with particular focus on supporting Devon care leavers. The Council has a statutory duty to co-operate with the County Council in making arrangements for improving the wellbeing of children in Devon.
- 4.2 The proposals will ensure that Council continues to provide timely and effective support to some of our most vulnerable residents who are struggling with the impact of the cost of living crisis.

Revenues and Benefits Service – the next 12 months

- 4.3 Whilst the team has made progress in the last 12 months, it is important to ensure that the momentum is not lost and we build further on areas of improvement to date as well as developing and improving the service for residents and businesses in other key areas.
- 4.4 The Revenues and Benefits Service Plan 2024/25 supports the delivery of several priorities in the Council Plan including providing good quality responsive frontline services that achieve good value for money for our communities. The team's service priorities for 2024/25 include:
 - Quality and customer focused service, where we offer a timely and consistent service and get things right first time.
 - Maximise income from Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rates and Housing Benefit overpayments.
 - Maintain speed of processing performance for Housing Benefit.
 - Respond effectively to legislative changes such as second homes and managed migration to Universal Credit.
- 4.5 In recognition of the continuing impact of the Cost of Living Crisis, the Council intends to create a new 2-year fixed term post (shared with South Hams District Council) to provide targeted support and assistance to residents. This will include support to those residents who would prefer to engage with us on an in-person basis. The post will be funded from administration costs from past and current Household Support Fund schemes. The postholder will work closely with partners such as Citizens Advice, West Devon

CVS and the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure we are providing joined up support to vulnerable residents.

- 4.6 In successfully delivering these priorities, the Revenues and Benefits service will be able to demonstrate that it has continued to develop and implement further service improvements, whilst continuing to provide excellent customer service and support for residents and businesses.

6. Implications

| Implications | Relevant to proposals Y/N | Details and proposed measures to address |
|--|---------------------------|---|
| Legal/Governance | | The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has provided funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer The Fund and provide assistance to households most in need. |
| Financial implications to include reference to value for money | | The Council will receive £125,045 from Devon County Council to deliver the Household Support Fund (1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024). An allocation of £16,000 will also be made to cover administration costs. Partners will be required to complete Management Information (MI) returns within clear timeframes. Payment will be received once the County Council has submitted MI returns and received funding from the Department for Work and Pensions. |
| Risk | | There is a reputational risk if the Council does not deliver support in a timely and responsive manner. |
| Supporting Corporate Strategy | | Support for residents during the cost of living crisis. Housing. Health and Wellbeing. Performance and Resources. |
| Consultation & Engagement Strategy | | There is no formal requirement to consult. |
| Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact | | No direct carbon/biodiversity impact arising from the recommendations. |
| Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications | | |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Equality and Diversity | | Equality impact assessments will be completed if required. |
| Safeguarding | | None as a direct result of this report, however some actions may help keep vulnerable children and adults safe. |
| Community Safety, Crime and Disorder | | None as a direct result of this report, however some of the recommendations may help to reduce crimes such as domestic violence. |
| Health, Safety and Wellbeing | | Financial wellbeing is crucial to the wellbeing of our residents and the recommendations in this report are designed to support this. |
| Other implications | | None. |

Supporting Information

Appendices:

None.

Background Papers:

None.

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Report to: **Hub Committee**
Date: **11 June 2024**
Title: **Housing – Parish Profiles**

Portfolio Area: **Housing - Cllr Mark Renders**

Wards Affected: **all**

Author: **Isabel Blake** Role: **Head of Housing**

Contact: **Telephone 01822 813551/email:
Isabel.blake@swdevon.gov.uk**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Hub Committee ENDORSE the Parish Profile approach.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 To provide an alternative to traditional housing need surveys officers have created the Parish Profiles. This easily digestible short document provides information from secondary data for use by developers, Registered Providers (RP's) and Members on a defined parish. It will present the facts in relation to house sale prices, tenures, availability on Devon Home Choice and numbers of people waiting for housing. It will also have further information on school availability and children on roll in receipt of free school meals.
- 1.2 The data will provide greater understanding of each demographic within a community and where those areas of need are.
- 1.3 The information will be publicly available on the Council website and updated annually.

2. Background

- 2.1 The traditional methodology for creating housing needs surveys relies heavily on people completing a form that is usually posted to an address in the parish and asks questions relating to housing need.

- 2.2 One of the fundamental issues with collecting data in this way is that response rates are normally low and people who have had to leave the parish due to availability and affordability of local housing are not easily represented. We have also attended events where people wishing to speak to a Housing Advisor about their circumstances are intimidated or embarrassed due to louder, often affluent voices who are anti-development and have left without the advice or support they often need.
- 2.3 While it is recognised that housing needs surveys are flawed, it is important to collate evidence in relation to housing that people can use to inform decisions and support the mix, size, tenure of any future development, whilst also understanding the local needs of a particular parish. Responding to this need Katie West, our Housing Data Officer, created parish profiles.
- 2.4 It is the intention to use parish profiles to support the responses by the Council in relation to affordable housing as a statutory consultee. Also to share them with our RP partners to support the need for development when seeking approval for funding bids through Homes England and through internal Boards. It will also support development on exception sites that may be brought forward through the West Devon Housing Offer.
- 2.5 To ensure these are as useful as possible these profiles will be publicly available on the Councils website so that they are accessible to all. Ward Members will be invited to comment on their parish profile and share widely as required.
- 2.6 As a pilot the Parish Profiles were trialled alongside the traditional Housing Needs Survey. The profiles were enthusiastically received by RP's and utilised by both the dedicated Affordable Housing Planner and the affordable housing team immediately.
- 2.7 It is the intention that these are refreshed annually and that if further information is felt to be of use this is reviewed as part of the work of the Housing Advisory Group.

3. Options available and consideration of risk:

- 3.1 The Council wishes to adopt an evidence-based approach to housing need, without the reliance on traditional housing needs surveys. It is fully accepted that there may be times where these are appropriate however the information supplied within parish profiles is a clear indication of housing need in a specific location from accepted secondary data sources.
- 3.2 It will be useful information for elected members, RP's and developers to understand the housing requirements of a specific

location and as useful evidence for planning officers and committee members in determining applications.

- 3.3 It is intended to use the Housing Advisory Group to consider any improvements that could be made to the parish profile, including any additional information. Each Member will be invited to comment on their own parish profile.

4. Proposal and Next Steps

- 4.1 It is the intention to launch the Parish Profiles on the Council website once wider Members have had the opportunity to review their local profiles.

5. Implications

| Implications | Relevant to proposals Y/N | Details and proposed measures to address |
|--|---------------------------|--|
| Legal/Governance | Y | N/A |
| Financial implications to include reference to value for money | N | The Parish Profiles rely on secondary data from several publicly available evidence sets. The approach offers better value for money than the traditional housing needs surveys, both those done in house and those completed by a third-party contractor. |
| Risk | Y | The Council is adopting Parish Profiles as an approach to capture housing need on an individual parish level. It may be that for some developments, particularly in the AONB or Dartmoor National Park that it is beneficial to also capture evidence through a traditional housing need survey. This will be decided on a case-by-case basis. |
| Supporting Corporate Strategy | Y | Homes |
| Consultation & Engagement Strategy | Y | Local Ward Members will be sent their own Parish Profile to review. The Member Housing Advisory Group will also discuss the content and make recommendations as appropriate. |
| Climate Change - Carbon / | Y | The parish profiles have reduced the reliance on paper forms, postage costs and milage. The |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Biodiversity Impact | | information will be readily available electronically and only printed by request. |
| Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications | | |
| Equality and Diversity | N | None as a result of this report |
| Safeguarding | N | None as a result of this report |
| Community Safety, Crime and Disorder | N | None as a result of this report |
| Health, Safety and Wellbeing | N | None as a direct result of this report |
| Other implications | N | None as a result of this report |

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Appendix A: Sample Parish Profile for Hatherleigh



HATHERLEIGH PARISH PROFILE

A useful background of the community within your parish.

Housing

- Average property prices of **£247,500** within Hatherleigh in 2022, increasing by **8.7%** from **£227,725** in 2021.
- 8.4% of homes are 1 bedroom properties, 29.4% are 2 bedrooms, 38.4% are 3 bedrooms, 23.8% are 4 or more (which is higher than the 21.1% average for England and Wales).
- Occupancy ratings for bedrooms:
 - 41.4% have +2 or more, 37.4% have +1, 18.9% have 0, 1.8% have -1, 0.5% have -2 or more.
 - This information shows the percentage of households that have spare bedrooms, those that have homes that meet the household size need, and those that are lacking bedrooms.
- Of the households in the parish, 39.6% own their home outright, 23.3% own with a mortgage or shared ownership, 11.3% live in social rented accommodation and 25.7% live in private rented accommodation or live rent free.



Affordable housing

- Current stock (approximate): **Live West** - 28 current affordable stock
- **Westward** - 40 affordable rented, 12 shared ownership..
- There have been 22 Affordable Housing units available through Devon Home Choice, between January 2019 and October 2023.
- This stock turnover included 10 x 1 beds, 7 x 2 beds, and 5 x 3 bed properties.
- There is an average number of 61 bids on bungalows. There is an average of 54 bids on 1 bedroom properties

| Number of Bedrooms | Average Bids | Property Type | Average Bids |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1 | 54 | Bungalow | 61 |
| 2 | 39 | Flat | 42 |
| 3 | 36 | House | 38 |



Renting in Hatherleigh

- Average 3 bed rental prices of **£750** per calendar month between 2020 and 2022 (median).
- The maximum Local Housing Allowance is £822.73 per month for a 3 bed property
- In the EX20 postcode area, there has been a 28.8% decrease in demand for rental properties, whilst there has been a 16.2% decrease in available listings, in the period between Sept 22 and Sept 23.
- During the same period, there has been a 11.3% increase in the asking price on Rental Properties in the EX20 postcode area.

Disposals

- At present, there have been 2 known properties marked for disposal by Live West within the parish within the last 12 months
- 1 x 2 bed house with stair lift and another 1 bed bungalow with an adapted bathroom facilities.
- These properties will be sold on the open market.

Devon Home Choice

- **31** applicants registered with a local connection through residence. A further **19** have a local connection through employment or family connection.
- The average income of households registered on Devon Home Choice with a local connection to Hatherleigh is **£15,960** annually (mean).



West Devon
Borough
Council



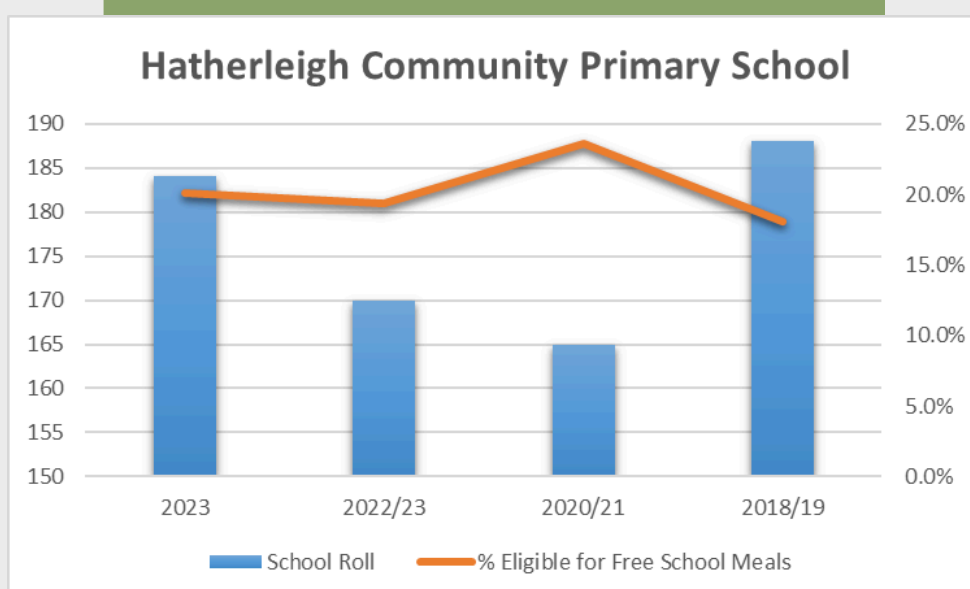
HATHERLEIGH PARISH PROFILE

A useful background of the community within your parish.

Hatherleigh Community Primary School



- Hatherleigh Community Primary School provides for children aged 4 years until 11 years.
- The number of children enrolled at the school has increased in recent years. The number of pupils is still below the school's capacity of 210.
- The percentage of children eligible for Free School Meals has slightly decreased within the same period. This is an indicator of income and affordability of essential provisions.



Recent Development



- Land at the Hatherleigh Market site is being developed into 120 new homes. 100 of these are houses or bungalows and have been completed. The remainder are apartments that are still to be completed.
- These are made up of 2, 3 and 4 bedrooms homes and bungalows.
- There are no affordable units on this site.

From the Census

- 23.4% travel less than 10km to their work place. 26% work mainly from home.
- 54.7% of the parish population are economically active and in employment, 2% are unemployed. 43.3% are economically inactive.
- 30.7% of households in the parish are single person households. 39.6% are two people households. These are both above the average for England. 13.4% are three person households, and 16.3% are four or more person households.
- 88.1% provide no unpaid care. 3.6% provide 50 or more hours of unpaid care a week. 2.6% provide 20 to 49 hours a week, and 5.7% provide 19 hours or less a week.
- 46.8% of households are not deprived in any dimension. 34.1% are deprived in one dimension, and 14% deprived in two dimensions.



West Devon Borough Council

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

This report contains exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (applies to Appendix A)

Report to: **Hub Committee**
Date: **11 June 2024**
Title: **Q3 and Q4 Write Off Report – 2023/24**
Portfolio Area: **Cllr Edmonds – Lead Hub Member for Performance and Resources**

Wards Affected: **All**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: Upon the expiry of the Scrutiny Call-in period – 5.00pm on 20 June.

Author: **Geni Hotchkiss** Role: **Head of Revenues and Benefits**

Contact: **geni.hotchkiss@swdevon.gov.uk**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Hub Committee:

- 1. NOTES that, in accordance with Financial Regulations, the Section 151 Officer has authorised the write off of individual debts totalling £70,622.70 as detailed in paragraph 3 of the report.**
- 2. APPROVES the write off of the individual debts totalling £131,967.22 as shown in Appendix A of the report.**

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The Council is responsible for the collection of Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rates, overpaid Housing Benefit and Sundry Debt.
- 1.2 This report informs members of debt written off for these revenue streams. Debt up to the value of £5,000 can be written off by the Section 151 Officer under delegated authority. Permission needs to be sought from Hub Committee to write off individual debts with a value of more than £5,000. Members agreed a write off policy in

March 2023 which sets out the circumstances in which a debt is deemed to be irrecoverable. This includes insolvency cases and where the debtor is deceased or cannot be traced.

- 1.3 The report covers the period 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2024. The total amount of debt to be written off is £202,589.92. For the period 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023 the total amount of debt written off was £107,148.06. The value of debt written off under £5,000 has remained broadly similar, with the increase being due to more debts totalling over £5,000 needing to be written off.
- 1.4 This is mainly due to cases of personal and business insolvency where the Council has no choice other than to stop recovering the debt. In a number of Individual Voluntary Arrangement (IVA) cases the Council does expect to receive dividends and, if the request to write off is agreed, the write off will be reversed as the dividend is applied to the account.
- 1.5 One of the key outcomes of the Revenues and Benefits Service Review is the improvement of collection rates for Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates and the report includes information about the amount of debt written off by financial year as well as comparing collection performance against shire districts.
- 1.6 In 2022/23 the Council achieved a Council Tax collection rate of 98.34% which was significantly above the national average of 96% as well as the average for shire districts which was 97.2%. This performance placed West Devon Borough Council in the top quartile nationally. The Council was ranked 26th highest out of 181 District Councils. We were also ranked 13th out of 72 predominantly rural Councils.
- 1.7 The Council Tax collection rate advised to the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities on the QRC return for 2023/24 is 98.3%. National collection rates are usually published in June and, depending on timing, officers will give a verbal update to the Committee on how the Council's performance compares to the national picture.
- 1.8 For Non-Domestic Rates, the 2022/23 collection rate of 99% also placed the Council in the top quartile nationally, compared to a national average of 96.8% and an average collection rate of 97.5% for shire districts. West Devon Borough Council was ranked 23rd highest out of 181 District Councils. We were also 8th out of 72 predominantly rural Councils.
- 1.9 The Non-Domestic Rates collection rate advised to the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities on the QRC return for 2023/24 is 97.78%. In-year collection performance for 2023/24

was impacted by one debtor who had an outstanding balance of £128,000 at year end. Had this liability been collected in full, the collection rate is estimated to have been 99% again for 2023/24. Action is being taken to collect the outstanding arrears.

- 1.10 National collection rates for 2023/24 will not be published until June and, depending on timing, officers will give a verbal update to the Committee on how the Council's performance for Non-Domestic Rates compares to the national picture.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council's sound financial management arrangements underpin the delivery of all the Council's priorities, including the commitment to provide value for money services. This report forms part of the formal debt write off procedures included in these financial arrangements. The Hub Committee agreed at its meeting of 7 March 2023 to adopt a Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rate (Business Rates) and Housing Benefit Overpayments write off policy to ensure transparency and consistency in decisions regarding the writing off of uncollectable debt.
- 2.2 It was also agreed that future write off reports would be presented in an updated format. Previously the report detailed debt written off during a quarter regardless of the financial year to which it relates. One of the key outcomes of the Revenues and Benefits Service Review is the improvement of collection rates for Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates and the report contains additional detail on debts written off by financial year.
- 2.3 The writing off of debt which is irrecoverable is recognised as good practice by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and the Department for Work and Pensions. Debts are only considered for write off after we have taken all steps to collect them. It is important is that processes and procedures are frequently reviewed to ensure maximum effectiveness in debt collection and recovery.
- 2.4 Whilst it is recognised that most of the income owed to the Council will be successfully billed for and collected, there are a variety of reasons why debt will become irrecoverable and needs to be written off. Debts will only recommended for write off once all options to recover and enforce them, as allowed for by the relevant legislation, have been exhausted.
- 2.5 When it is certain that debts are irrecoverable or the cost of recovery would outweigh the benefit, debts should be written off following appropriate review and authorisation with reference to the write off policy. A full audit trail is also retained.

3. Outcomes/outputs

Council Tax Write Offs

- 3.1 The table below shows Council Tax debts which have been approved for write off in Quarters 3 and 4 of 2023/24 by the Section 151 Officer under delegated powers. It also compares the cases and amounts against the corresponding quarters of the 2022/23 financial year.

| Reason for write off | No. of cases | 2022/23 – Amount written off (£) | No. of cases | 2023/24 – Amount written off (£) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---|---------------------|---|
| Debtors who cannot be traced | 2 | 472.24 | 33 | 20,167.68 |
| Death of a debtor | 13 | 5,678.69 | 2 | 975.11 |
| Insolvency | 34 | 48,786.34 | 57 | 34,844.15 |
| Small balance | 101 | 1,454.69 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Miscellaneous | 2 | 394.28 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Uncollectable old debt | 20 | 3,917.32 | 7 | 1,171.29 |
| Total | 172 | 60,703.56 | 99 | 57,158.23 |

- 3.2 The primary reason for writing off Council Tax debt remains insolvency. This includes debt relief orders and bankruptcy and the high level continues to reflect some of the financial issues council taxpayers may be experiencing due to the cost-of-living crisis. It should be noted, however, that the amount has reduced compared to the same period of 2022/23.
- 3.3 The increase in the number of debtors who cannot be traced reflects the work the team have been doing on collecting aged debt. Periodic searches are undertaken to see if a forwarding address is now known and, if it is, the debt will be written back on.

Council Tax Write Offs by financial year

- 3.4 The breakdown below details the write-offs by financial year. The Council's collection rate for 2022/23 of 98.3% was significantly above the average performance of Shire Districts which was 97.2%

and we wrote off a small amount of debt in year. Again, we wrote off a small amount of debt relating to 2023/24 and it is expected that the collection rate of 98.3% will keep the Council in the top quartile nationally. In 2022/23 the top quartile was a collection rate above 98.07%.

| Financial year | Amount written off (£) | In year Collection Rate | Shire District average |
|----------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Pre 2018/19 | 12,525.25 | Various | Various |
| 2018/19 | 7,889.15 | 97.7% | 97.9% |
| 2019/20 | 6,731.40 | 97.7% | 97.7% |
| 2020/21 | 8,634.37 | 97.3% | 96.9% |
| 2021/22 | 7,613.40 | 97.8% | 97.2% |
| 2022/23 | 7,953.71 | 98.3% | 97.2% |
| 2023/24 | 5,810.95 | 98.3% | TBC |
| Total | 57,158.23 | | |

The cost of a write off for council tax is shared between WDBC and all the other preceptors in the same proportion as the overall council tax bill. The financial impact on WDBC is 11% of the overall amount.

Council Tax Write Offs – over £5,000

- 3.5 Permission needs to be sought from Hub Committee to write off individual debts with a value of over £5,000. As this information is confidential, the full details are contained in the exempt appendix however the high-level detail is as follows:

Case 1

Amount - £8,879.39

Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 2

Amount - £10,896.16

Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 3

Amount - £5,938.12

Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 4

Amount - £1,536.28

Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 5

Amount - £2,710.97

Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 6

Amount - £8,777.31
Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 7
Amount - £5,106.04
Reason for write off – Individual Voluntary Arrangement.

Case 8
Amount - £6,583.78
Reason for write off – Debt Relief Order.

Non-Domestic Rate Write Offs

3.6 The table below shows debts under £5,000 which have been approved for write off in quarters 3 and 4 of the 2023/24 financial year as approved by the Section 151 Officer under delegated powers. It also compares the cases and amounts against the corresponding quarters of the 2022/23 financial year.

| Reason for write off | No. of cases | 2022/23 – Amount written off (£) | No. of cases | 2023/24 – Amount written off |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|
| Insolvency | 6 | 12,590.30 | 6 | 2,906.69 |
| Debtors who cannot be traced | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Death of a debtor | 0 | 0.00 | 2 | 1,083.37 |
| Small balance | 1 | 0.10 | 50 | 16.94 |
| Uncollectable old debt | 2 | 260.18 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Total | 9 | 12,850.58 | 58 | 4,007.00 |

3.7 The primary reason for writing off Non-Domestic Rate debt remains insolvency which is indicative of difficult trading conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. The write off figure has, however, significantly reduced when compared against the same period in 2022/23.

Non-Domestic Rate Write Offs by financial year

3.8 The breakdown below details write offs by financial year and compares the Council's in-year collection rate against the average for shire districts. A small amount of in year debt was written off

in 2022/23 and it should be noted that we achieved a NNDR collection rate of 99.0% compared to an average for shire districts of 97.5%. Again, a small amount of Non-Domestic Rates debt relating to 2023/24 was approved for write off by the S151 Officer in-year. The reason for the dip in performance is set out in paragraph 1.7.

| Financial year | Amount written off (£) | In year collection rate | Shire District average |
|----------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Pre 2018/19 | 1,300.84 | Various | Various |
| 2018/19 | 0.08 | 97.6% | 98.4% |
| 2019/20 | 14.38 | 97.6% | 98.3% |
| 2020/21 | 0.00 | 91.5% | 95.0% |
| 2021/22 | 0.00 | 93.7% | 97.0% |
| 2022/23 | 259.58 | 99.0% | 97.5% |
| 2023/24 | 2,432.12 | 97.8% | TBC |
| Total | 4,007.00 | | |

The cost of a write off for business rates is shared between WDBC, DCC and the Fire Authority as well as Central Government. The financial impact on WDBC is around 22% of the overall amount as this is the proportion of the amount billed that WDBC gets to keep for business rates.

Non-Domestic Rates Write-Offs over £5,000

- 3.9 Permission needs to be sought from Hub Committee to write off individual debts with a value of over £5,000. Details of five cases are included in the exempt appendix:

Case 1

Amount - £6,741.22

Reason for write off – Miscellaneous.

Case 2

Amount - £3,596.62

Reason for write off – Miscellaneous.

Case 3

Amount - £18,488.89

Reason for write off – Creditors Voluntary Liquidation.

Case 4

Amount - £6,275.29

Reason for write off – Liquidation.

Case 5

Amount - £8,619.86
Reason for write off – Liquidation.

Housing Benefit Overpayments Write Offs

3.10 The table below shows debts under £5,000 which have been approved for write-off in quarters 3 and 4 of 2023/24 by the Section 151 Officer under delegated powers. It also compares the number of cases and amounts to the same quarters in 2022/23.

| Reason for write off | No. of cases | 2022/23 – Amount written off (£) | No. of cases | 2023/24 – Amount written off (£) |
|------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Insolvency | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Death of a debtor | 1 | 5.82 | 1 | 3,161.51 |
| Small balance | 1 | 2.68 | 6 | 37.84 |
| Uncollectable old debt | 3 | 122.51 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Miscellaneous | 28 | 834.16 | 17 | 6,258.12 |
| Total | 33 | 965.17 | 24 | 9,457.47 |

3.11 There has been an increase in the amount written-off in comparison to the same quarters for the 2022/23 financial year, although the overall total of write offs in relation to the amount outstanding remains low. This is due to good progress continuing to be made in collecting old debt because of improved data sharing with the Department for Work and Pensions and a dedicated post of Housing Benefits Overpayments Officer.

3.12 Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in the write off of debt which is either categorised as 'miscellaneous' and is due to 'local authority error' or 'DWP error.' In these cases, the overpayment is not legally recoverable and we therefore have no choice other than to write it off. As part of the Revenues and Benefits Service Review, a new role of Training and Quality Assurance Officer has been recruited to with the successful candidate having joined the team in mid-April. This should result in more accurate processing and a reduction in the future write off of non-recoverable debts.

Housing Benefit Overpayments Write Offs over £5,000

3.13 Permission needs to be sought from Hub Committee to write off individual debts with a value of over £5,000. Details of two cases are included in the exempt appendix.

Case 1

Amount - £18,453.47

Reason for write off – Debtor is deceased.

Case 2 - £9,976.09

Reason for write off – Debtor is deceased.

Sundry Debt Write Offs

3.14 There were no sundry debts under £5,000 approved for write off in quarters 3 and 4 of 2023/24 by the Section 151 Officer under delegated powers.

Sundry Debt Write Offs over £5,000

3.15 Permission needs to be sought from Hub Committee to write off individual debts with a value of over £5,000. Details of one case is included in the exempt appendix.

Case 1

Amount - £9,387.52

Reason for write off – Liquidation.

4. Options available and consideration of risk

4.1 The Hub Committee can either approve the debt being written off or not. Should the write off of an individual debt not be approved, it will remain on the relevant system as an outstanding balance. In cases of insolvency there is no other option available to the Council other than to write off the debt.

4.2 If debts remain on the system, it may result in additional time and cost spent pursuing the debt when there is no realistic prospect of collection. This is an inefficient use of the Council’s staffing resources.

5. Proposed Way Forward

5.1 The Hub Committee approves the write off of individual debts more than £5,000 as detailed in Appendix A.

5.2 The Hub Committee notes the debts under £5,000 approved for write off by the Section 151 Officer under delegated powers.

| Implications | Relevant to proposals Y/N | Details and proposed measures to address |
|--------------|------------------------------|--|
|--------------|------------------------------|--|

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Legal/Governance | | <p>The relevant billing, collection and recovery processes are governed by statutory provisions linked to the type of debt. Debts will be written off in accordance with the Council's Financial Procedure Rules, the Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rate (Business Rates) and Housing Benefit overpayments write off policy and any legislation relevant to the type of debt. All relevant enforcement remedies will be pursued before a recommendation to write off is made.</p> <p>The relevant powers for this report are contained within the following legislation. Section 151 Local Government Act 1972 Section 44 Local Government Finance Act 1988 Section 14 Local Government Finance Act 1992</p> |
| Financial implications to include reference to value for money | | <p>A clear process for the writing off of irrecoverable debt represents effective financial management practice. To continue to pursue debt when it is no longer cost effective to do so is an inefficient use of resources. Provision for bad debts is made in the Council's accounts.</p> <p>The Committee notes that, in accordance with Financial Regulations, the Section 151 Officer has authorised the write off of individual Council debts totalling £70,622.70 as detailed in paragraph 3.</p> <p>It is recommended that the Committee approves the write off of the debts more than £5,000 for £131,967.22, as detailed in the exempt Appendix A. The total debts to be written off are £202,589.92.</p> <p>The cost of a write off for council tax is shared between WDBC and all of the other preceptors in the same proportion as the overall council tax bill. The financial impact on WDBC is 11% of the overall amount.</p> <p>The cost of a write off for business rates is shared between WDBC, DCC and the Fire Authority, as well as Central Government. The financial impact on WDBC is around 22% of the overall amount as this is the proportion of the amount billed that WDBC gets to keep for business rates.</p> |
| Risk | | <p>The Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rate (Business Rates) and Overpaid Housing Benefit write-off policy provides assurance regarding controls and the operational process in recovering debt. It should be recognised, however, that due to the volume, value</p> |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | | and nature of annual debt due to the Council there will always be irrecoverable amounts which will be recommended for write off once all enforcement remedies have been exhausted. A provision for bad debts is made in the Councils' accounts. The debt recovery policy and the write off policy and supporting procedures are in place to minimise risk. |
| Supporting Corporate Strategy | | Delivering efficient and effective services. |
| Consultation & Engagement Strategy | | There is no requirement to consult. |
| Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact | | No direct carbon/biodiversity impact arising from the recommendations. |
| Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications | | |
| Equality and Diversity | | All enforcement action prior to writing off debt is undertaken in accordance with the relevant legislation and accepted procedures. The Council's approach to dealing with debtors remains fundamentally unchanged, however through formalising policy and procedures we are better able to engage with debtors who have potentially tried to ignore their debts. |
| Safeguarding | | None directly arising from this report. |
| Community Safety, Crime and Disorder | | None directly arising from this report. |
| Health, Safety and Wellbeing | | None directly arising from this report. |
| Other implications | | A bad debt provision is built into the financial management of the Council. |

Supporting Information

Appendices:

A – EXEMPT paper: individual debts over £5,000.

Background Papers:

None

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By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

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