

**QUESTIONS TO CABINET MEMBERS**

Thursday 5 September 2024

**1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY**

**Re: X formally Twitter**

Devon County Council has c 52,000 followers on X (formally Twitter) which is significantly more than on its Facebook account. Yet in January this year DCC announced it was no longer active on this platform. Please explain why DCC no longer wishes to engage with Devon residents using this platform, who was consulted and who made this decision.

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR SAYWELL**

Our Corporate Communications Team constantly monitors our use of social media platforms to ensure we are making informed decisions around their use, and to identify new opportunities for engaging with residents.

The Corporate DCC X account is dormant, which means we can activate real-time messaging if needed and appropriate. This decision was made based on:

- **Cost:** Since becoming X the platform has moved to a paid subscription for basic features such as analytics and increased reach. The basic subscription is \$2,000 per year; full access \$10,000 a year. In the current financial climate, and with declining engagement, we felt unable to put resource into a platform we can't measure.
- **Disinformation:** X has become a very toxic place with high levels of abuse and disinformation. DCC staff – including Communications Team colleagues managing the platform - were faced with daily abuse. The reporting system is also not fit for purpose; you only get priority support with a paid subscription. Hundreds of previously banned accounts for spreading hate and disinformation were reinstated under the new owner, and an European Commission study suggested X has the biggest proportion of disinformation of the six big social networks.
- **Benchmarking:** We consulted with other public sector organisations, and many have also taken the decision not to engage actively with X for similar reasons to ours.

We do monitor the platform and are able to pick up relevant posts and intelligence, such as in the case of the recent protests and claims of potential unrest in Exeter.

We are focusing instead on other social media platforms which offer good engagement including Facebook (34k followers) Instagram (6k followers),

LinkedIn (23k followers) and our new WhatsApp Channel (currently 332 followers). We also use Next Door which allows us to target specific communities.

And we have our digital newsletter, Connect Me, which reaches around 100,000 subscribers on a weekly basis, and our public websites which have of over 3 million visits a year.

Through this range of communication activity, we reach a wide audience across Devon, keeping residents informed and engaged.

Making the Council's X account dormant was an operational decision based on the evidence available, such as the disinformation experienced on the platform and the toxic nature of content. Staff received high levels of abuse and exceptionally inappropriate and offensive material was submitted to the Council. This of course has a significant impact on the staff who received such communications.

**2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HODGSON**  
**Re: Overgrown Verges**

There are many complaints being made to me by town and parish councils and residents in my division regarding growing concerns about overgrown hedges and foliage making pavements and roads dangerous for pedestrians. Officers have been out to check these but say they do not exceed safety limits and trimming must await the turn in the regular programme. However the complainants disagree and some are citing legislation for safety and in particular keeping pedestrian ways safe and accessible for less able and disabled citizens, raising concerns that we are failing to meeting these legal obligations. What are we doing to ensure our policies and practices are legally compliant and enabling all pedestrians are safe and feel safe using public highways?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR HUGHES**

We have a legal duty under the Highways Act 1980 to keep the highway network and users safe. We achieve this by carrying out inspections of our network, in accordance with our Highway Safety Policy, which is available on line. The policy, which was updated in 2021 includes our approach to formal safety inspections, including their frequency which is dependent on the maintenance category of the respective section of highway/footway. This includes the investigatory criteria for overgrown hedges and bushes that needs to be met to trigger a risk assessment, which in turn will determine a suitable response timescale. The investigatory criteria we use to determine an actionable safety defect for overgrown vegetation aligns with many authorities across the country, and forms part of our risk-based approach.

In addition to our formal safety inspection regime, and in line with recommendations set out in the national code of practice 'Well Managed Highway Infrastructure', we also provide a facility for members of the public to report overgrown hedges and bushes, details can be found on our "Report a Problem" web page.

**3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY**  
**Re: Developer Contributions**

East Devon has been subjected to very high levels of development in the last decade which has put huge pressure on our services and infrastructure. It is vitally important that DCC collects and accounts for all developer contributions to which it is entitled to mitigate the impact of development. However DCC has been failing to publish the annual Infrastructure statements for more than two years.

Have Devon residents missed out on developer contributions to DCC, and if so by how much?

When will the legally required and overdue statements be published?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR TWISS**

The process for securing developer contributions is established at the Local Plan stage when infrastructure needs are identified and prioritised in an Infrastructure Delivery Plan. This guides what the County Council negotiate with developers to secure section 106 contributions or make the case to District Councils for funding from their Community Infrastructure Levy. The majority of funds secured relate to education and transport infrastructure and officers need to ensure that what is requested is reasonable and proportionate in planning terms, considering the viability of development and other competing demands, e.g. for higher levels of affordable housing. This will impact on what level of funding might be secured for County infrastructure. Officers work very closely with the local planning authority who monitor compliance with the section 106 and notify County officers when payment is due at the appropriate stage of development. The County Council is not aware of any missed funding opportunities.

As an authority that values continuous improvement, earlier this year officers invited a Devon Assurance Partnership review into how developer contributions are monitored, collected and spent. Several actions were agreed including additional resource to support improved coordination of information and data across the numerous teams involved in the planning process; benchmarking with other authorities on their monitoring systems, and sharing of best practice from the Devon's Schools Place Planning team to other teams to provide greater assurance and a more consistent approach across the authority. An action plan has also been agreed to have all infrastructure funding statements produced and in place by the end of the financial year.

**4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HODGSON**  
**Re: 20mph speed limits**

What can we do to bring in more 20mph speed limits in residential areas, outside schools and enable more people to access buses on busy thoroughfares?

## **REPLY BY COUNCILLOR HUGHES**

By way of background, we've had over 150 separate requests in the 3 years we've been running our Expression of Interest (Eol) process for new 20mph zones. This significantly outstrips the resource currently available to deliver them. Equally, not all Eol's are appropriate for progression.

Eol's are scored using the framework approved by Cabinet on 8th December 2021, and those with the highest scores are prioritised for delivery.

For those locations that are suitable but don't meet our prioritisation criteria, there is the option for communities to self-fund and deliver via a competent/qualified 3<sup>rd</sup> party (DCC would still provide a guiding hand).

It is worth noting that the scoring matrix considers vulnerable users amongst other factors, and proximity to a school/playground attracts positive scoring.

With regards to accessing bus services, in 2021 the UK Government published its National Bus Strategy, which provided a pathway to help bus services improve following the COVID19 pandemic. Devon County Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan was developed and subsequently approved by Cabinet on 13 October 2021. Work continues towards the stated aims of this plan (e.g. higher patronage, increased bus priority, high quality information etc) across the county. For example, the recent alteration to New North Road (outside John Lewis) in Exeter has improved journey time reliability for hundreds of buses per day.

## **5. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY Re: Judicial Reviews**

Please can the Leader provide details of any judicial reviews launched against DCC over the past 12 months and explain how the relevant portfolio holder/senior officers have communicated these details to the members of DCC.

## **REPLY BY COUNCILLOR SAYWELL**

Over the past 12 months we have received 17 Judicial Review challenges covering issues relating to Adult Social Care, Planning, SEN and Communities. This is in line with benchmarking. Whilst it is inappropriate to discuss individual cases many of them will not be granted permission to appeal following initial hearings.

I am able to confirm Cabinet Members are regularly briefed on key matters in their areas including any Judicial Reviews relating to their particular portfolio. Members, however, are briefed as is appropriate to the circumstances of the case, taking into account relevant legislation such as the Data Protection Act, Safeguarding issues or the confidentiality of legal proceedings.