

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 4 June 2020 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

J M Downes (Chairman)
N V Davey, R J Dolley, R Evans,
Mrs S Griggs, D F Pugsley, R F Radford,
J Wright and A Wyer

Apologies

Councillor

T G Hughes

Also Present

Councillors

L J Cruwys, G Barnell, Mrs F J Colthorpe, B G J Warren,
A White, Mrs M E Squires and Mrs N Woollatt

Also Present

Officers

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Jenny Clifford (Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration), Adrian Welsh (Group Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Andrew Busby (Group Manager for Corporate Property and Commercial Assets), Dean Emery (Group Manager for Revenues and Benefits), John Bodley-Scott (Economic Development Team Leader), Chris Shears (Economic Development Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN (CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL IN THE CHAIR)

RESOLVED that Cllr J Downes be elected Chairman of the Group for 2020 / 2021.

2 ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN (00:00:41)

RESOLVED that Cllr N V Davey be elected Vice Chairman of the Group for 2020 / 2021.

3 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (00:02:05)

Apologies were received from Cllr T G Hughes who was substituted by Cllr R Evans.

4 REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL (00:02:18)

The protocol for remote meetings was **NOTED**.

5 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (00:03:10)

There were no members of the public present.

6 **DECLARATION ON INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT (00:03:30)**

No interests were declared under this item.

7 **MINUTES (00:03:53)**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2020 were confirmed as a true and accurate record.

8 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00:03:59)**

The Chairman stated that for the time being the Policy Development Group would focus solely on Covid-19 related issues as they affected the Council.

9 **COVID 19 ECONOMIC RESPONSE (00:05:40)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration providing Members with information regarding the Growth, Economy & Delivery team's COVID19 emergency economic and community response activities, informing members of emerging work setting the scene for recovery and providing the opportunity for the Economy PDG Members to contribute towards the process and associated policy direction.

The focus of the discussion was structured as follows and the following updates provided:

Overview of the current situation

- At the current time there had been almost 40,000 deaths recorded nationally, 100 people had tested positive in Mid Devon and there had been 8 deaths in the district.
- The impact upon the south west region had been immense in terms of the impact on the economy and the numbers of unemployed which had increased to 3.8% from 1.7% between March and April 2020.
- Food and drink had really suffered particularly those supplying the hospitality industry
- Regionally, tourism had been badly affected.
- Town centre businesses, particularly retail, had been hit hard by the lockdown.
- Small micro businesses had benefitted by Government grant assistance and in many cases they had been very creative in their endeavours to keep going.
- Larger businesses had had particular issues and many had not been eligible for financial support.

Business Assistance

- Over the last 10 – 12 weeks the Economic Development Team had worked closely with the Rates team administering, to date, 1567 payments totalling £18,457m. There had been strict eligibility criteria in place regarding the initial Government scheme and a mix of businesses had qualified. Feedback from businesses had been very positive.

- A new Discretionary Grants scheme had now been introduced providing a much smaller pot of money at just over £1.1m. Although this was much less it required far more intensive work with the Government requesting that this money be distributed as widely as possible. Information from businesses needed to be gathered before grants could be distributed. To date 21 payments had been made totalling £67,500. It was hoped a further £200k would be distributed in the following week. There were still gaps in terms of who was eligible for this scheme but the team were working hard with Devon County Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership so that partners could lobby Government and plug any gaps.
- The administration of these payments was manageable at the moment given the dedicated nature of the staff working within the relevant teams.
- The Rates Valuation office had been involved in determining how much was needed in each region in relation to business assistance and so far the amount of available money had not been exceeded with some businesses declining take up. Any unspent monies would need to be returned to Government. If there was an overspend the Government had said that they would cover it provided legitimate reasons could be provided.
- As grant distribution under the national scheme was tailing off, it was mentioned that at some point a cut-off date to the original scheme would be helpful in order to ensure the Council could distribute the maximum amount of funding to Mid Devon businesses since any unspent monies remained the property of the Government.

Community Support

- The Council had been managing the Shielding Hub working with colleagues in Leisure, Customer First, Housing, Environmental Health and Property Services. To date, there had been 127 referrals with 107 emergency packs being distributed. On top of this people with dietary needs had been catered for.
- £102k had been received from Devon County Council as a Local Hardship Fund. This was designed to assist people who are self-employed or who had been furloughed or made redundant and experiencing financial hardship, however, there had not been much take up.
- The third element to work in this area had been in trying to secure priority supermarket slots for vulnerable people whose support networks were not being sustained.
- The team had also been liaising with community groups and the voluntary sector.
- It was explained that the bulk of the grants in relation to these community schemes had been received after the 'peak of the wave', therefore they had been slightly too late in terms of the target audience. However, this did not mean that support would not be needed in the weeks and months to come.
- It was confirmed that business grants were taxable but that small discretionary grants were not.

Tiverton Pannier Market

The information provided in the report was relayed with questions being asked in relation to the support and assistance provided in the other towns within the district such as Crediton and Cullompton.

Crediton Town Council had been in touch regarding re-opening the High Street and discussions had taken place with Environmental Health. Cullompton Town Council had also been in contact regarding available grant schemes.

- Regarding the Tiverton Pannier Market, it was suggested that this was a large space and that perhaps an increase on the current number of 2 shoppers permitted inside should be allowed. This initial number had been agreed upon as a result of Government and health and safety guidance, however, this could be looked at again in the light of ever changing advice.
- The Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration stated that he had been in touch with the three Town Mayors who he had agreed to meet to discuss a re-opening of the towns on 15 June 2020. Devon County Council would need to be involved especially in relation to traffic issues. He saw it as his and the Economic Development team's role as supporting towns to re-open.
- The Tiverton Town Centre Partnership had some good ideas about re-opening the town under social distancing guidelines which would be explored.

Next steps in planning recovery

Significant concerns remained about the long term impacts of Covid-19, however, the Council needed to explore the initial, most effective, first steps towards recovery.

The Group received a presentation regarding the following key areas:

- The Groups and Bodies involved in Economic Recovery
- Initial thoughts on areas of intervention
- Re-opening the High Streets Safely Fund

Discussion took place regarding:

- Many of the aspirations stated echoed those of the past, were they still relevant? It was explained that they were but that some would now receive a different level of significance. It was fair to say that some of the emerging support measures would taper off.
- It was noted within the presentation that 'the necessary skills needed to be in place' to achieve recovery. This would relate to the skills already within businesses but also that closer working would need to take place with Petroc and the Local Enterprise Partnership to secure the necessary skills going forwards. Support and training opportunities would need to be provided.
- There would be a significant impact on Council funding going forwards, however, it was unclear whether it would return to a period of significant austerity in terms of the financial impact of Covid-19 or it would manifest itself in some other way such as zero rated borrowing. The effects would

be cumulative and it was likely that a revised budget would be brought before Members in the autumn.

Role of the PDG and Members generally

- It was agreed that this was the correct PDG for receiving and understanding information about where we are and how we are doing in terms of getting support out to those that need it. The weekly briefing to all Members was vitally important and strongly encouraged to continue.
- Ward Members must be included in the next stage of recovery and the Re-opening the High Streets Safely Fund since they were the people that had the best local knowledge.
- All councillors had a role to play in risk assessments and in feeding back issues they thought were important.
- It was **AGREED** that an article be placed in WIS regarding the uptake of grants so that all Members could take this back to their communities.
- Town and Parish Councils should be involved in the recovery process as much as possible.
- Current Risk Assessments would determine how many shops could re-open and how quickly.
- The Devon Emerging Recovery Group would be an important group in the move towards recovery and would be a good source of information for the region.

Whilst recognising that the tourism and hospitality sectors had been greatly affected within the region it was still early days within the recovery period and it was difficult to get a feel of the true effects upon the economy at the current moment. This would become more apparent over the coming months and there was an opportunity for the Group to meet on 16 July when perhaps more would be known and actions could be put in place in terms of Member involvement going forwards.

The following summary of the actions needed was identified by the Chairman:

- Members needed to be kept updated on the grants programme, the number of applications received and the amount of grant distributed.
- Members needed to be kept briefed on the businesses involved and supplied with some sort of table illustrating the most severely affected sectors.
- Completing Risk Assessments on High Streets was a priority.
- A programme of support for the tourism and hospitality sectors was vital as well as initiatives to provide a greener outcome going forwards.
- Weekly briefings to Members were vital as well as an opportunity to ask questions.

The Chairman stated that a more focussed discussion could take place at the next meeting once more was known. He thanked the Economic Development team on behalf of the whole Group for the work, assistance and support they had provided to the local community during recent months. This was greatly appreciated by Members since they were at the core of the challenges being faced by the Council and were doing a tremendous job in very difficult circumstances.

Note: * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

10 START TIME OF MEETINGS

The Policy Development Group did not discuss this item therefore this would be rolled forward to the next meeting.

11 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

The Policy Development Group did not discuss items for the next meeting although it had been stated by the Chairman at the start of the meeting that the focus for the Group in the short term would be on Covid-19 related issues only.

(The meeting ended at 7.15 pm)

CHAIRMAN