

## **MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 13 January 2022 at 5.30 pm

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

J M Downes (Chairman)  
Mrs C Collis, N V Davey, R J Dolley, Mrs S Griggs,  
R F Radford and J Wright

### **Apology**

#### **Councillor**

D F Pugsley

### **Also Present**

#### **Councillors**

R M Deed, R Evans, B A Moore and B G J Warren

### **Present**

#### **Officers**

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Richard Marsh (Director of Place), Dean Emery (Corporate Manager for Revenues, Benefits and Recovery), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance), John Bodley-Scott (Economic Development Team Leader), Jason Berry (Economic Development Project Manager), Fiona Wilkinson (Operations Manager for Revenues Benefits & Recovery), Sally Gabriel (Member Services Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

## **38 Apologies and Substitute Members**

Apologies were received from Cllr D F Pugsley.

## **39 Public Question Time**

There were no members of the public present and none had registered a question in advance.

## **40 Declaration of Interests under the Code of Conduct**

There were no interests declared under this item.

## **41 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2021 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

## 42 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman reminded the Group that there would be an informal workshop on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2022 to discuss 'Skills and Employment' with representatives from Petroc. This would be held at 5.30pm via Zoom.

## 43 **Meeting Management**

The Chairman informed the Group that he would be taking 'Urban Renewal in Coastal and Market Towns' as the next item of business.

## 44 **Urban renewal in coastal and market towns (00:05:00)**

Mr Gareth Jones from 'Hardisty Jones' attended the meeting via Zoom to present a report prepared for Devon County Council entitled 'Urban Renewal in Devon's Coastal and Market Towns'. This study was about the future role and prosperity of market and coastal towns in Devon. The county was part of the Heart of the South West (HotSW), so original research undertaken for the study on Devon complimented recent work on the future of towns in HotSW.

The following was highlighted within the presentation:

- Policy Objectives for Towns
- Challenges
- Opportunities
- Devon Towns: Future Objectives
- Pilot Towns: High Level Plan
- Potential Projects: Themes
- Recovery from Covid 19
- Places to live
- Places to work
- Places to visit
- Places to shop
- Places to access services
- Healthy and vibrant places
- Inclusive places
- Sustainable places
- Connected places

The following comments and discussion took place following the presentation regarding:

- Managing to achieve affordable housing within towns remained a difficult issue. A number of mechanisms could aid this such as accessing available government funds, investing in the conversion of unused spaces, working with Homes England and developing robust Local Plans and development strategies.
- Evidence for the study had been gathered from businesses, resident groups and district councils. All the towns spoken to had shown great enthusiasm for economic growth.

- Investors needed confidence in the potential success of suggested projects. Taking an initial risk which proved to be successful could lead to further investment and an increase in confidence amongst investors going forwards.
- The Group felt that they agreed with the aspirations and goals of the study but that they had heard a lot of this before and questioned the reality of being able to achieve these objectives given current financial constraints.
- The key was having projects, a strategy and a vision that were 'shovel ready' so that when government funding was available the Council was ready to proceed as quickly as possible.
- 'Business improvement districts' could have a strong role to play in the future but there were challenges since they were largely funded through additional Business Rates.
- The need for examples of projects nationally where initial investment had led to successful outcomes for the economy of regenerated towns.
- The need for reality checks, for example, public transport challenges in the local area, also Mid Devon had a limited amount of land available and that which was available was expensive. Also the lack of adequate Broadband continued to be a key issue of concern in rural areas.
- Applying for funding was an extremely competitive business, however, funding pots were available. Local Councils had been promised 'Levelling Up' funds and Devolution in the future so there was a reason to be optimistic.
- The study had identified Tiverton as being one of the towns which would benefit from further funding. Work was being undertaken to articulate a clear vision and strategy which could be used as a future template for other towns within the district.

The Chairman concluded the discussion by stating that the Economic Development Team needed to thoroughly analyse the report and extract from it the benefits that could be applied to Mid Devon. The key appeared to be having 'shovel ready' projects so that as soon as government funds were available the Council could apply without delay. It was about putting the Council in the best possible position and investing in project plans and business cases as soon as possible.

#### 45 **Budget 2022/2023 update (01:17:00)**

The Group had before it a report \* from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) reviewing the revised draft budget changes identified and seeking discussion on the further changes required in order for the Council to move towards a balanced budget for 2022/23.

The Cabinet Member for Finance stated that there had been a £1.4m budget gap which had now reduced to £947k. He outlined the process the revised budget would take allowing all Members of Council the opportunity to participate in its development before finally needing Council approval at the end of February.

The Deputy Chief Executive (S151) stated that the report attached to the agenda had been written before Christmas and an updated position needed to be relayed. He referred to the budget being 'squeezed' for a number of years and the fact that it may be necessary for Members to consider a reduction in service provision.

In order to address the current budget gap of £947k he outlined the following options to balance:

PDG Saving Target	-500
Release Earmarked Reserves	-200
Further savings / Income required	-247

Having looked at the income and expenditure of each PDG area he had apportioned the savings needing to be identified by this Group as circa £11,500.

Consideration was given to:

- Maximising opportunities of motorway junction development to enable further business growth opportunities. Concern was expressed that there had not been an opportunity to progress this since the adoption of the Local Plan. It was felt that the Group could undertake a proactive role in steering progress in this area. It was **AGREED** that an item be placed on the agenda for the next meeting to discuss this further.
- A possible increase in car parking charges, however, the future effect of the continuing pandemic on shoppers visiting the towns was still unclear and increasing the budget target in this area would present a risk.
- Consideration of the development of underused car parks for housing schemes was supported and might enable a better utilisation of the Councils land assets. This would need a great deal of consideration in the initial stages but could be something the Economy and Homes PDG's could work on jointly.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that, as part of the budget for 2022/2023:

- a) Consideration be given to development on car parks and other land assets such as market housing and modular housing in order to better utilise Council assets and maximise income.
- b) The Council maximise the opportunities presented by motorway junctions development to allow for further business growth opportunities.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Reason for decision:

To maximise all possible opportunities for the Council to set a balanced budget for 2022/2023.

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

#### 46 **Covid 19 Economic Recovery Update (01:52:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Director of Place updating members on recovery activities at county and district level and progress on the preparation of a districtwide COVID 19 Economic Recovery Plan.

It was explained that since the report had been written there was a need to update the Group on a number of the activities referred to within the report. This included the following:

- Currently the unemployed claimant count remained above the pre-pandemic levels but had fallen slightly from 2.8% to 2.7%.
- Since the report was written the Government had announced two more business grants schemes in response to the Omicron variant and its impact in particular on the hospitality and leisure sectors.
- The Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant Scheme, £1.6 million for distribution as grants of £2,667, £4,000 and £6,000 dependant on the business rate value. Both these schemes would need to be fully allocated and processed by the end of February which mean't that the deadline for applications was the 14<sup>th</sup> Feb.
- The Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) Scheme, would be receiving £187k to support business linked to hospitality and leisure that were not eligible for the main scheme. The team were still awaiting further clarification before this could be open for applications.
- It was a great credit to the team that they had been able to open the scheme for applications so quickly and had already received 11 applications.
- The nature of the management of the grants scheme mean't that the Economic Development Team would be fully occupied in grant delivery for the next 6-8 weeks.
- Up to 31<sup>st</sup> December £70,366 of the Household Support Fund had been allocated, with a further £10,000 of applications still in the pipeline out of the original £86,836 allocation. The team had now managed to negotiate a further £44,000 to top up the fund, which would hopefully extend the programme until the end of February.
- The team had been planning to run an event to bring tourist and hospitality businesses together in the middle of February this year, however the venue that had been booked had now decided to close until April 2022, so the event had been postponed until later in the year.
- Work in relation to the Public Realm project had also been affected by the high workload created by the management and distribution of business grants and the team would need to postpone the meeting arranged for next week.

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

#### 47 **Identification of items for the next meeting (02:00:00)**

The Chairman stated that the items listed on the agenda for the future meetings were an indication only. There had been a shift in the workload priorities within the Economic Development team and items would come forward when they were realistically able to. However, it was requested that there be an update to the next meeting on work being undertaken to progress opportunities for business growth by development at the motorway junctions.

(The meeting ended at 7.16 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**