

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 5 October 2023 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

J M Downes (Chairman)
G Cochran, A Cuddy, M Farrell (Vice
Chairman), B Fish, M Fletcher and N Letch

Apology

Councillor

G Westcott

Also Present

Councillors

E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, S J Clist, G Czapiewski,
G Duchesne, A Glover, C Harrower, S Keable, F W Letch,
J Lock, L Taylor, J Wright and D Wulff

Also Present

Officers

Richard Marsh (Director of Place), Matthew Page (Corporate Manager for People, Governance and Waste), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change), Luke Howard (Environment and Enforcement Manager), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Zoë Lentell (Economic Development Team Leader), Angie Howell (Democratic Services Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

24 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Apologies were received from Cllr G Westcott.

Cllrs: E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, S Clist, G Czapiewski, A Glover, F Letch MBE, J Lock, L Taylor and D Wulff attended the meeting via Teams.

25 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no questions from members of the public.

26 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

No interests were declared under this item.

27 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 3 August 2023, were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman subject to an amendment to state that Cllr M Fletcher was present as a Group member at the meeting and not online as well.

28 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman stated that he would be taking, item 8, the Car Parking Working Group as the next item of business and that item 6, the Medium Term Financial Plan – General Fund, as the penultimate item of business on the agenda. This was to accommodate officers having other meeting commitments during the evening.

29 CAR PARKING WORKING GROUP UPDATE (00:05:00)

The Chairman of the Car Parking Working Group, Cllr Guy Cochran, provided the following update on what had taken place since the last meeting:

- The first meeting of the parking consultation group was held on 20 September 2023. Representatives of Tiverton and Crediton Town Councils, business groups and prominent business owners, Members and officers had been present.
- There had been an emphasis by officers surrounding the importance of coming up with credible and economically viable proposals that would encourage the Economy Policy Development Group to make recommendation to the Cabinet for potential implementation. The aim was to look at this from a longer term perspective, as the impact of the recent changes brought in at the end of June 2023 needed to be assessed in terms of their impact (likely to be a 6 to 9 month period). It was therefore likely that the working group would be looking at the 2024-2025 financial year for these proposals to be considered.
- It was also stressed that with inflation stubbornly high the cost of running parking including associated utilities like tarmacking, machine maintenance and patrolling public areas was considerable.
- During discussion, a review of the terms of reference was undertaken and discussion held within the group on how these could represent respective communities.
- Future agenda items were discussed and the group decided that the most pressing matters for them were:
 - To look at a 3 hour tariff option being brought in alongside the current 1 and 2 hour rates to encourage more visitors and residents to spend longer in the towns.
 - To look at how empty car spaces were utilised, for example, trial cheaper rates for certain spaces to see if they were used.
 - To look at ways to incentivise permits, for example, car sharing, monthly debits with a particular focus on business.
 - To get Christmas parking for the year ahead signed off and in the budget, for example, arrangements for Christmas parking 2024 to be agreed when the 24/25 budget was set and agreed by full Council.
 - To review Tiverton Disability Access – including Kerbside and Disabled Spaces.
 - To examine Market permits being issued to traders on special events, which then prevented shoppers from being able to park.

- The actions requiring sign off from the Cabinet Member for Finance were raised in relation to parking over the Christmas period. It was agreed that the 5 Saturdays before Christmas were requested for free parking in 2023, for example, 25 November then 2, 9, 16, 23 December. These would be applicable in the Multi-Storey Car Park, Tiverton, Station Road Cullompton and High Street/St Saviours Way, Crediton.
- Further meetings are planned to take place every 6-8 weeks.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- When the Group would see the written Terms of Reference from the Working Group including the proposed outcomes? It was confirmed that a paper would be brought to the next Policy Development Group meeting in November.
- The need for it to be very clear that the eventual recommendations to the Cabinet would be coming from this Policy Development Group.
- Whether a special permit could be provided to individuals enduring exceptional circumstances, for example, a terminally ill resident receiving ad-hoc palliative care. It was confirmed that if the individual approached Parking Services through their Ward Member then this ought to be possible.
- More attention needed to be paid to the location of coach parking within Tiverton.
- Whether it was possible to provide an incentive for market traders to park their vehicles in the Multi-Storey Car Park (MSCP) rather than take up spaces in the public car park. It was confirmed that this was being looked at.
- Whether it was possible to 'bulk buy' tickets for use in the MSCP?
- The possibility of creating a facility for camper vans to park overnight.

The Chairman stated that he was very encouraged by the amount of work that was taking place. The issue was extremely important and was now being given the correct amount of consideration and focus.

30 **JUNCTION 27 UPDATE (00:25:00)**

The Director of Place provided a verbal update on Junction 27 which included the following information:

- Members were reminded of the significant allocation in the Local Plan given to Junction 27 which had included a particular focus on Leisure and Tourism with J27 providing a gateway to Mid Devon and the rest of the county.
- The Local Plan had been delayed in order to ensure the incorporation of the site.
- Since that time, progress had been significantly less than might have been expected or hoped for. This was unsurprising in some ways given the impacts of covid and subsequent economic turbulence.
- Over the last 2 years, officers had sought to engage with various landowners, promoters and interested parties. The Eden Project were granted a significant amount of funding, via Government, to explore options around the development of a new tourist destination called Eden Grounds. That work was completed and determined that whilst a destination was attractive to Eden as

an operator, it was not viable for the business to support the level of capital investment required to deliver an attraction at junction 27 and that it would therefore require facilitation by landowners or other operators across the site. This was a disappointing conclusion to the work.

- Since that time, officers had continued to seek to engage the other landowners and developers associated with the site – with mixed success.
- Some owners were keen to progress proposals, but these were not yet at a stage where developers or owners were proactively engaging with the Council in terms of progressing planning applications or other aspects of development.
- The position in relation to the planning policy on the site remained as agreed at the stage of the adoption of the Local Plan and, as such, the Council would seek to secure development in compliance with it.
- The passage of time and current market conditions meant that it would be necessary to review the planning policy for the site in the context of the new Local Plan. Work was already underway in terms of the development of the new Local Plan and, in the meantime, officers would continue to seek to engage the landowners and prospective developers in proactive dialogue.
- Members would have multiple opportunities to engage with this process through the Planning Policy Advisory Group as well as the Economy Policy Development Group.

The Chairman stated how disappointing this was given the initial excitement about J27 being the 'jewel in the crown' of Mid Devon, not to mention how delayed the Local Plan had been as result of these initial proposals.

31 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE (00:36:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Place updating Members on activities undertaken by the Economic Development Team during the last two months.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- The overall funding position regarding the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund which was summarised as follows:
 - In total, the team had secured just over £1.8M of funding under both SPF and REPF. However, the funding was annualised (meaning the Council would not anticipate receiving next year's funding until after returning it's end of current year monitoring report on 1 May and there were no guarantees that the underspend would be rolled over).
 - The SPF and REPF funding was awarded disproportionately over the duration of the programme. During the first year (2022-23), the Council received £12% (£129,146.00) of the total SPF funding at the end of January for project delivery by the end of March. For the current year, 2023-24, the Council received 24% (£258,291.00) of the total SPF in July and next year the Council were due to receive the remaining 64% (£676,722.00).

- Similarly for REPF, the Council received 25% of the funding this year (£204,168) and were due to receive the remaining 75% of funding (£612,504) in 2024-25.
 - All funding must be spent by 31 March 2025.
- The team had commissioned 'Be Grant Ready' workshops delivered by Business West to support businesses, community groups and town and parish councils to help produce quality applications.
- Business Growth fit-out grants.
- The Prosper scheme providing general advice for starting and maintaining businesses.
- Agricultural innovation events.
- Local Growth Fund.
- A recent Jobs Fair with 220 attendees.
- Continuing work regarding visitor information boards in local towns.
- Continuing work in relation to Cullompton High Street and the Crediton Masterplan.
- The Group was informed of the Government's announcement for in principle funding for the Cullompton Railway Station. The final business case is due for submission at the end of the year and we should hear more from Government in the New Year once this submission has been formally considered.

Consideration was given to:

- What would happen if the funding was received later than predicted and the impact of this.
- Advertising had been undertaken including press releases, reminders, social media campaigns and direct contact.
- Perceived complexities of the application process, however, the team could always provide advice and support to help make the process simpler.
- The grant schemes were open to all organisations that were classed as a 'legal entity'.
- The procurement process and having to provide 3 quotes if the goods or services were over £2500 and 'best endeavours' if they were under this amount.
- The Council also worked with other groups such as the Petroc Innovation Centre.
- Feedback from businesses regarding the support workshops had been very positive.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

32 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - GENERAL FUND (01:09:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting the updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) which covered the period 2024/25 to 2028/29 for the General Fund (GF) and considered initial savings options.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- This was a 5 year plan with figures in relation to years 2 – 4 being best guesses.
- The previous budget gap for 2024/25 of £1.5m had now increased to over £2m partly as a result of stubborn inflation and the Government's indicative increase in planning fees not transpiring.
- Assumptions had been made in terms of not using any reserves and the need to revise the capital programme.

The Group considered the savings options outlined in Appendix 2 and discussion took place regarding:

- Town Councils potentially being able to seek more 'value' from any assets transferred to them than the District Council could.
- The Council was not intending to achieve savings by imposing compulsory redundancies but rather it would consider not replacing people automatically when they left and undertake a thorough review of the risks involved in each case.
- What the green, amber and red risk categories meant.
- Where the Group agreed with potential savings proposals this was undertaken as an 'in principle' support to the approach. It expected the Cabinet to consider the detail of each suggestion.
- How staff sickness could best be managed and what the Council was already doing regarding this.
- This Group had a very small budget area but could be influential in suggesting areas for income generation and this would continue to be a high priority ambition of the Group.
- Members could attend other Policy Development Group meetings to offer specific ideas for budget savings in the relevant areas.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

- i. A review of leases, where appropriate in relation to commercial income be undertaken with a view to increasing income.
- ii. Discussions regarding the transfer of assets and / or increases in financial contributions be progressed with the Town Councils.
- iii. An increase in income from parking charges be considered, specifically in relation to cost centres CP520 / 530 / 540.
- iv. Support be provided to a Council wide approach to de-scoping or downsizing activity in certain areas having considered all the relevant risks and assuming turnover allows for natural wastage in identified areas.
- v. A reduction in agency spend be considered wherever appropriate.
- vi. A reduction in the cost of staff sickness be pursued.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Reason for the decision

By undertaking an annual review of the MTFP the Council could ensure that its Corporate Plan priorities were affordable. The implications of the revised budget gap were set out within the paper. Many areas require greater clarity, particularly around national funding and the possibility of additional funding to offset the implications of the Cost of Living Crisis. Therefore a number of key assumptions underpinned the reported position, which would be refined as greater clarity was received through the budget setting process.

It was **NOTED** that there could be possible cost reductions in relation to Business Rates, energy costs and fuel costs during 2024/25.

Note: (i) * Report previously circulated.

(ii) Cllr N Letch requested that her abstention from voting in relation to recommendation number 'iv' be noted.

33 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:47:00)**

The following items were identified by the Group as needing to come forward to a future meeting:

- Using the 'Visit Mid Devon' platform to best effect.
- An update and further discussion on a number of anniversary events taking place during 2024 and how best to promote activities and maximise potential 'growth' for all those involved.
- An update on incubator space.

(The meeting ended at 7.25 pm)

CHAIRMAN