

MINUTES of a MEETING of the PLANNING, ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held on 3 September 2024 at 5.30 pm

**Present
Councillors**

B Fish (Vice-Chair), G Cochran, C Adcock,
C Connor, G Czapiewski, A Glover,
C Harrower and L Knight

**Also Present
Councillor(s)**

S Keable, N Bradshaw, J Buczkowski and J Wright

**Also Present
Officer(s):**

Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Richard Marsh (Director of Place & Economy), Paul Deal (Head of Finance, Property & Climate Resilience), Jason Ball (Climate and Sustainability Specialist) and Angie Howell (Democratic Services Officer)

**Councillors
Online**

E Buczkowski, J Lock, S Robinson and D Wulff

Officers Online

Dr Stephen Carr, Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager

14 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (00:03:47)

There were no apologies for absence.

Cllr G Westcott attended on line however she apologised as she would need to leave the meeting early.

15 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (00:03:53)

Cllr Barry Warren, Chair of Willand Parish Council asked the following question:

I wish to speak please in relation to item 9 on your agenda with particular reference to Paragraph 2.3.2 on page 83 of your bundle.

The preparation of the Willand Neighbourhood Plan has not been a straightforward journey as the consultation process was rather hampered by Covid restrictions. Although Officers in the Forward Planning Department have been helpful there have been well documented delays in getting responses from them at times.

The report was prepared by a group consisting of Parish Councillors and residents and the services of an experienced Consultant was commissioned. This has used up all our grant and some monies have had to be taken from reserves to cater for some unexpected work and the delays.

The Parish Council are concerned that officers are now trying to 'rush' the Parish Council into agreeing to the suggested modifications. Some are straightforward and acceptable, others are causing concern with some individuals. It is the Parish Neighbourhood Plan and some of the 'modifications' need to be considered and debated before a decision can be made.

The Parish Clerk, on behalf of Council has resisted the time scale set by officers, with reasons. Of concern is the apparent non compliance by officers with the advice and guidance which has been given to us. This has been shared and discussed with officers but your brief does not reflect this.

There is a concern that the matter is going to go before Planning Policy Advisory Group, which is not open to the public or Parish Councillors. We have waited all this time, a lot of work and thought has gone into the plan and we would not like to be put in a position of withdrawing the plan. The guidance on discussion with the Parish has not been meaningfully carried out. This information has been conveyed to officers but no proper discussions have been held as advised. The Head of Forward Planning rang the Clerk and after discussion agreed to review certain points and come back to her. To date she has heard no more.

We have waited a long time to get to this position so why are we now being 'rushed'?

The Chair advised that a written reply would be sent within 10 working days.

16 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT (00:07:09)**

No interests were declared under this item.

17 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (00:07:34)**

The minutes of the last meeting held on 18th June 2024 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

18 **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00:07:57)**

The Chair made the following announcements:-

As Chair of NZAG he wished to update Members with the following:-

- That the Group were trying to ensure that we understood and took forward its responsibilities to deliver net zero.

- A wide range of challenges had been discussed and the Group were now trying to focus on a dashboard of action to be taken to bring about change in a sensible manner without extreme costs.
- The Group have had input into the National Planning Policy Framework by consulting with the Policy Planning Advisory Group with a view to driving forwards the highest standards and meeting the highest environmental standards in energy output in new buildings.
- The Group were keen to build as many houses as possible and to ensure that they met the highest standards of carbon performance to safeguard the quality and design for local residents for decades to come.
- The Group were working on promoting a greener policy and were focussed on how energy could be saved and were looking at potential areas of building rapport with the local community and supporting local landlords.

19 MDDC DRAFT BUDGET FOR 2025/26 FIRST REVIEW (00:12:51)

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 2025/26 to 2028/29 for the General Fund (GF) and considered initial savings options.

The Head of Finance, Property and Climate Resilience presented the report and the following was highlighted:

- The MTFP covered a period from 2025/26 to 2028/29. Normally this would be a 5 year plan but were currently awaiting greater clarification from the new Government and the Chancellor's budget announcement on 30th October 2024. The 5th year will be added following this.
- The MTFP focussed on a framework of principles those being:
 - (i) General Fund Reserves
 - (ii) Optimise Income Generation
 - (iii) Allocation of Revenue Resources
 - (iv) Allocation of Capital Resources
- The MTFP built on a number of assumptions around inflation which were shown in Appendix 1.
- Overall the result of pressures on the budget left a £1.2m gap rising to 4m by year 4 if the Council took no action.
- Over the summer officers had looked at options which had been RAG rated as red, amber, green in terms of risk and deliverability.
- If the green and amber savings were accepted this would reduce the £1.2m gap down to £400,000
- All Policy Development Groups would be asked to look at possible savings which would then be presented to Cabinet.

Discussion took place regarding:-

- Apprenticeship Schemes and how they would help to build resilience in the Council despite the initial costs.
- Where the remaining £400,000 savings could be made. It was explained that this was the first draft of the budget which may alter after the Chancellors statement. The budget would also be presented to other Policy Development Groups to help identify savings in order that officers could help to set a balanced budget.
- Whether Town and Parish Councils could take on more assets or non-statutory services from the Council. It was explained that despite dialogue with the 3 main towns in Mid Devon there was limited response in terms of them making further contributions or taking on assets. This was work in progress although there was nothing to report at this stage.
- Budget pressures on the Climate Action Plan to show a commitment to allocating resources.

The Group considered and **RECOMMENDED** to Cabinet the Round 1 Budget Proposals as set out in Appendix 4a.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

By undertaking regular reviews of the MTFP the Council could ensure that its Corporate Plan priorities were affordable. The implications of the budget gap were set out within the paper. Many areas required greater clarity, particularly around national funding and possible changes to Government Policy. Therefore a number of key assumptions underpinned the reported position, which would be refined as greater clarity was received through the budget setting process.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

20 **PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q1 (00:33:45)**

The Group were presented with the Performance Dashboard for Quarter 1 2024/25. The following was highlighted within the report:-

- The Quarter 1 Dashboard had been reviewed and aligned to the new PDG structure and the Corporate Plan.
- The overall performance was presented in the pie chart.
- Finance measures relating to capital projects were showing under performance. This related to delays in scoping 3 capital projects.
- Building control was below budget due to the depressed housing market.

The PDG **NOTED** the report.

Note: * Performance Dashboard previously circulated.

21 CLIMATE AND SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMME UPDATE (00:35:45)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED** a report* from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change. The following was highlighted within the report:-

- Carbon Footprint - positive news, with a smaller footprint than last year, as the Council began to see the effects of switching to green electricity and the leisure centre decarbonisation projects. The results raised the question - what would the Council do about those emissions - and how would it prioritise investments to save energy and carbon.
- As a Council, it was important that teams were focussed on what the Council directly controlled (i.e. Operational Carbon Footprint). However, we also had a vital role in the ways we influence others. The Council's Climate Strategy will be a springboard to more / better engagement with communities across Mid Devon, as we seek to support them to set ambitions and lead change across the district.
- The Council was looking to increase its capacity to more actively engage with community leaders and scale-up its collective ability to reduce carbon footprint across Mid Devon.
- Examples included biodiversity enhancement on Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) owned land, community energy schemes and the establishment of a Climate Forum.
- Cabinet had recently looked at the Council's new contract for the fleet of cars to reduce the carbon footprint for the Council's vehicles.
- The Cabinet Member was keen for this Policy Development Group to input to the Climate Strategy and Action Plan where all views were welcome here and/or through NZAG.
- NZAG had talked about possible ways to engage communities on climate matters.

The Climate and Sustainability Specialist also highlighted the following:-

- Carbon footprint figures were split into key components which included buildings, transport and operational practices.
- Key actions were being gathered by working with teams responsible for those areas and for service leads to look at ideas and how the Council would work with communities to make changes.
- Currently focussing on how the Council could make the biggest differences more quickly.

Discussion took place with regard to:-

- The effect that Covid had on carbon footprint figures and whether reduction figures were due to Covid or through improvements.
- The figures from the past and the aims for the future – was there a way of indicating whether the Council were on track. Also discussed the option of an external consultant to review the Council's action plan.
- How the Council were engaging with communities to help them too. The PDG were informed that the Council were working with the wider community and hoping to work in partnership with others that could help the Council as well.

- The Council’s housing stock and whether there was a programme for improving energy efficiency in existing and future homes. It was explained that there was a programme in place but there was room for improvement. The Housing Team were doing “brilliant work” on the new net zero builds.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

22 **PLANNING SUMMARY REPORT (00:59:30)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED** a report* from the Director of Place and Economy summarising activity undertaken in relation to planning matters. The following was highlighted within the report:-

- This was a new report which sought to provide Members with updates across matters relating to Planning and Building Control. The following issues were included within the report:-
 - a) New National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
 - b) Update on the Local Plan
 - c) Development Management Policies
 - d) Development Management
 - e) Conservation
 - f) Building Control
 - g) Planning Enforcement and
 - h) Urban and Rural Regeneration

In answer to the public question the Director of Place and Economy briefly explained that in terms of supporting the Parish Council in taking the Willand Neighbourhood Plan forward there was no intention on behalf of Mid Devon District Council to rush the process and all were keen to do what was right for the Parish Council. Officers were mindful to find a timetable to support the adoption of the Neighbourhood Plan as soon as possible and to move forward in a timely and positive manner without delay.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

Notes:-

Cllr A Glover declared in interest with regard to the Willand Neighbourhood Plan.

23 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:04:23)**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, the items identified in the work programme for the next meeting.

(The meeting ended at 18:37)

CHAIR