

## MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 26 September 2019 at 5.30 pm

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

J M Downes (Chairman)  
N V Davey, R J Dolley, Mrs S Griggs, T G Hughes,  
D F Pugsley, R F Radford, A Wyer and B Holdman

### **Apologies**

#### **Councillor**

J Wright

### **Also Present**

#### **Councillors**

L J Cruwys and R Evans

### **Present**

#### **Officers**

Adrian Welsh (Group Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Joanne Nacey (Group Manager for Finance), Stuart Noyce (Group Manager for Street Scene and Open Spaces), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Chris Shears (Economic Development Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

## 27 **Apologies and Substitute Members**

Apologies were received from Cllr J Wright who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman.

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

No interests were declared under this item.

## 29 **Public Question Time**

There were no members of the public present.

## 30 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 August 2019 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman subject to the removal of the following sentence from the second bullet point in minute number 23 'Economic Development Projects Update':

'This was due to an oversubscription of bids being made.'

## 31 Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman informed the Group that Matt Barrow, a Devon County Council officer from Economy, Enterprise and Skills, would be providing an update to the Scrutiny Committee on 28<sup>th</sup> October regarding Broadband provision in Mid Devon. The Economy Policy Development Group were specifically invited to attend this meeting since Broadband fell within their remit and the issue would be of particular interest.

## 32 Performance and Risk Report (10 minutes)(00:08:50)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Head of Planning & Economic Regeneration providing it with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2019/20 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security outlined the contents of the report explaining that the figure showing for August 2019 in terms of the number of businesses assisted was 69 within the report, this was incorrect and should have been recorded as 114 as it needed to also include the number of new business enquiries as well.

Discussion took place regarding:

- 'An empty shop' might include more than one unit.
- Whether an approach was made to shop or business owners when they vacated a property in terms of offering them help and support? The Group Manager for Growth, Economy & Delivery explained that where they could, the team did all they could to gather information from the vacating business owner. However, it was not always possible to do so as the team may not have become aware of the vacation until after it had happened. However, they understood that one of the reasons for vacating a premises was often due to diversification or just relocation within the town to trade somewhere else which in their view presented a more beneficial proposition.
- There were many attempts being made to increase footfall figures within the town including working in partnership with others, particularly the traders themselves, holding events and development of the destination website.
- A close eye would need to be kept on the future Cabinet decision in relation to the Tiverton Masterplan and how this would affect trading activity within the town.
- Whilst Fridays were busy in the Tiverton Pannier Market and increasingly more traders and activities bare being held on the other days of the week, it was acknowledged that more needed to be done to increase footfall on these other days of the week.
- Consideration needed to be given to making the Tiverton Pannier Market warmer during the winter months especially for traders who were often in there for many hours.

The Group was informed that the National Association of British Markets had awarded the Tiverton Pannier Market 'Market Team of the Year', the Group congratulated the team.

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

### 33 **Financial Monitoring (10 minutes) (00:22:27)**

The Group received, and **NOTED**, a verbal report from the Group Manager for Financial Services updating it on the position regarding income and expenditure so far in the year.

The following was highlighted regarding the current position:

- There had been a slight improvement in figures between June and July 2019.
- The main area of concern lay in the area of Planning which was predicted to show a significantly under budget level of fees by the end of the year. This was due to a combination of factors including some that were offset by Earmarked Reserves (£159k). The residual overspend related to £329k of planning income due to a drop off in large applications. However, the comment was made that this position might be improved as a result of the Tiverton Eastern Urban Extension and North West Cullompton developments.
- Car park income was still down in the MSCP although there had been some increased income in the market car park to offset this.
- The Housing Revenue Account had not moved from the favourable position that was reported in June 2019.

A brief discussion took place regarding the recent approval by the Cabinet of the Car Parking Working Group recommendations and when these revised fees might come into force. It was explained that there was still a consultation process to go through first and that it would take 3 months for the off street parking order to be processed. However, it was hoped that the new charges would come into effect sometime shortly after Christmas 2019.

### 34 **Recommendation from the Cabinet that the Economy PDG consider the issue of overpayments for car parking (15 minutes) (00:30:15)**

On 22 August 2019, as part of their consideration of the Car Parking Working Group report, the Cabinet made a recommendation that:

“The Economy PDG be requested to consider the issue of overpayments for car parking and what should happen to the additional income.”

Consideration was given to:

- The actual figure relating to overpayments was not significant being in the region of £2k. In the past, due to charges being non-rounded, there had been an annual overpayment of approximately £15k, however, when the pricing policy was changed 3 years ago the majority of charges were rounded reducing the ability for customers to over pay.
- It was further explained that the Council already offered a number of concessions such as 30 minutes free parking at night time and free parking at school drop off and pick up times for 2 schools in the district.
- The Council also provided significant funding to organisations within the voluntary sector on an annual basis in the region of £157k. The Group also needed to bear in mind that there was still a £1.4m gap in the budget for next year.

- It would cost significantly more in officer time to manually calculate overpayments and it was felt this would be a time consuming and costly job for very little purpose.

Having considered the issue in depth and recognising that the Council already provided funding for a number of charitable organisations on an annual basis, it was:

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that any small monies overpaid from car parking are retained and utilised within the overarching car park budget.

(Proposed by Cllr N V Davey and seconded by Cllr Mrs S Griggs)

**35 Free parking in towns in the run up to Christmas - could Town Councils choose to use these 'free' parking days at other times of year? (15 minutes) (00:36:31)**

It was requested at the previous meeting that further consideration be given to allowing Town Council's the opportunity to decide for themselves when to use the 'free parking' option currently available to them on the three Saturdays leading up to Christmas and on Christmas light switch on days.

The provision of free car parking in the three town's long stays car parks had come about historically with Town Councils being written to each year to ask when they would like their free car parking in the long stay car parks. Town Councils had already requested the free parking be provided on the Saturdays before Christmas for 2019. It was noted that this was an approximate loss to the Council of £3.5k per annum which had to be subsumed within an overall budget deficit.

It was felt that to offer random days throughout the year might be slightly confusing for members of the public who had got used to the free parking on the Saturdays before Christmas.

The Group unanimously **AGREED** that, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance, Town Councils should be written to next year offering them the chance to hold their free parking days at other times of the year should they wish or to maintain the current arrangement.

**36 Economic Development Service Update (15 minutes) (00:42:14)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration updating it on progress with Economic Development activities. The Chairman requested that the Group focus their attention on those activities appearing in the report with a red risk factor status.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The Business Awards initiative was currently showing with a red risk status. However, the Group Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery stated that it was not pragmatic to continue to the award ceremony this year. The media company the District Council had been working with in partnership with had not been able to secure sufficient private sponsorship for an award ceremony to take place this year. However, discussions would continue to attempt to deliver this initiative in 2020.

- Since the publication of the agenda, the Council had been successful in passing stage 1 of the Cullompton Historic England bid. The team were now waiting for details of the second stage assessment.
- Whether there was funding available to support the rear of shops being tidied up in the same way that there was a shop front enhancement scheme. The team explained that they would investigate whether such schemes existed.
- There was disappointment that the implementation of the destination website had been delayed, however, in moving forwards it would be vital for businesses to be fully on board and regularly consulted allowing them the opportunity to add their own content. An update would be brought to a future meeting once this project had progressed.
- In relation to the Hydromills project, a meeting had been held with Neil Parish MP who was offering his support and who had been involved in coordinating the submission of documents and updates to the Environment Agency. There had been positive interactions with the angling community regarding the Tiverton Weir but there had been some challenges in negotiations regarding the Thorverton Weir. The anglers had been involved at every stage and the team were confident a satisfactory position would be agreed with the ecology of the rivers being the number one priority.
- Work was ongoing regarding consultation and tender preparation in relation to WiFi within Tiverton.
- It was felt that a Council owned shop on the corner of the entrance to the Pannier Market on Fore Street in Tiverton needed some tidying up on the outside. It was currently in a very dirty state and comments had been made by the public. The team agreed to look into this.

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

### 37 **Cost Recovery & Commercialisation in Growth, Economy & Delivery (15 minutes) (00:58:46)**

The Group had before it a report \* from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration presenting it with the steps necessary to introduce cost recovery into the Growth, Economy and Delivery Service, and updating it with regard to potential next steps for further commercialisation within the service.

The Economy PDG at its March 2019 meeting considered cost recovery opportunities. The Group had expressed concern that charging for business support services could be a disincentive particularly for fledgling companies. The Group had also wished to better understand how other authorities were grappling with these financial challenges. Since the March meeting officers had been undertaking more research. It was felt that of the opportunities relating to cost recovery the area which officers considered could be introduced most simply and quickly and which had the necessary mechanisms in place was the input of the Service into the planning process. This related to both pre-application enquiries and economic development input into Planning Performance Agreements.

Discussions with other local authorities had identified that there were no directly relevant nearby examples of charging for some areas previously considered. More work was required to better understand available opportunities. This would include discussions with relevant development agencies and it was confirmed that the Economic Development team would be applying under the LGA's Productivity Expert

Programme for support from a Local Economic Growth Advisor to advise on opportunities for commercialism within the service.

Discussion took place regarding:

- What level of support and advice was included within the proposed fees? It was confirmed that supplementary advice was included and this might include a visit. The fees were consistent with other charging schedules in the planning service.
- The planning pre-application advice fee would be administered through the existing planning administration team; any LGA activity would be administered through the Economic Development team.
- It was confirmed that under the current arrangement the Council could only seek the recovery of costs.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that:

- a) The bill of charges for economic development related advice with regard to the planning process laid out in Section 2.0 be approved.
- b) Officers be tasked with seeking LGA funding to help investigate opportunities within the Service for further commercialisation including the potential to develop a commercial arm for the delivery of some discretionary services.

(Proposed by Cllr N V Davey and seconded by Cllr R J Dolley)

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

**38 The Mid Devon Economy and the UK leaving the European Union (30 minutes) (01:08:48)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration informing it about the potential impact of the UK leaving the European Union on the local economy and the support structures in place to help ensure business activities continue with minimal disruption.

The officer outlined the contents of the report summarising the key points of information under each of the headings listed.

Consideration was given to:

- How the Group wished to be updated on Brexit matters. The Chairman emphasised the point that it was not the responsibility of this Group to consider the Brexit issue as a whole but rather how Brexit impacted on the economy of Mid Devon. It was **AGREED** that consideration of Brexit in this regard would become a standing item on the Economy PDG agenda moving forwards and that should a special meeting be needed, as and the situation changed nationally and locally, it would be arranged. Relevant information would also be emailed to Members as and when it was received. It was also acknowledged that an all Member briefing on Brexit and how this Council was equipped to cope with it would be held on Thursday 24 October 2019.

- Members who had attended the Tiverton Business Forum the previous evening had been very impressed by a speaker from 'Taste of the West' who had been positive, hopeful and full of aspiration in terms of the opportunities offered by Brexit. The Group requested that he be approached to attend a future meeting of this Group.

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

### 39 **Identification of items for the next meeting (01:33:55)**

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme, the following was requested to be on the agenda for the next or a future meeting:

- More information in relation to the Council's bid to the 'Future High Street Fund' which had been unsuccessful. This had been reported to the Group at their meeting on 8 August 2019.
- Update on the impact of Brexit on the Mid Devon economy.
- Invitation to Mr John Sheaves from 'Taste of the West' to discuss his views on the impact of Brexit in the food and drink sector.

NB: The Group requested that additional approaches be made to representatives from the farming, agriculture and business sectors in due course to gain a better understanding of how Brexit would affect the local economy from those directly affected.

(The meeting ended at 7.10 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**