

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 12 March 2020 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, A Wyer, R Evans
and B Holdman

Apologies

Councillors

R F Radford and J Wright

Also Present

Officers

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Adrian Welsh (Group Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), John Bodley-Scott (Economic Development Team Leader), Joanne Nacey (Group Manager for Financial Services), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Dean Emery (Group Manager for Revenues and Benefits), Chris Shears (Economic Development Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

64 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr R F Radford who was substituted by Cllr R Evans and also Cllr J Wright who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman.

65 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

No interests were declared under this item.

66 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No members of the public were present.

67 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

68 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

69 CREDITON HEART PROJECT (00:00:05)

Trustees from the Crediton Heart Project had been invited to attend the meeting to provide more information about the work of the Crediton Heart Project. This included a presentation with the following key messages:

- Concerns regarding the number of community buildings that had been closed, whether or not Crediton would become a dormitory town and most jobs being in Exeter.
- Activities within the town such as the Crediton Festival, Mumcycles, the Flag Project and the Boniface Heritage Trail.
- The desire for Crediton to be an economic success, a place with cultural talent and a developing community that fulfilled the vision both of the Crediton town plan and Mid Devon District Council.
- The project aimed to create Crediton as a place of destination, acting as the 'social glue' connecting people, encouraging new projects, support businesses and sourcing funding.
- They had a plan for a community website promoting venues, groups, events activities and businesses. However, the project needed flexible spaces for performance, cinema, leisure and learning rooms for meetings, activities, services and small businesses.
- Progress so far included a skilled, active Trustee group, a community consultation resulting in over 600 responses, a professional feasibility study and a commissioned website.
- Next steps included seeking funding for the website to go live later this year, engaging partners for the project, finding a site, commissioning an architect and also seeking funding for a building which would act as the 'hub'.

Discussion followed with regard to how MDDC could engage with the project:

- Old Heathcoat School was available as a possible venue and an invitation was extended to the project group to liaise with a tourism group from Tiverton planning to visit similar sized towns in the Netherlands.
- Crediton had many different clubs but needed a central hub.
- Developers had obligations with regard to S106 and might be interested in engaging with the project. This need not necessarily be in relation to a specific housing site but could be located elsewhere. There could also be opportunities in relation to the Greater Exeter Strategic Partnership (GESP).
- The Project team were encouraged to contact the Economic Development team and local district councillors as sources of expertise in terms of connecting people.
- MDDC had recently launched the 'Visit Mid Devon' website and this could act as a valuable resource for promoting events in the Crediton area. The Economic Development team would be able to provide clarity on how it could link up with other stakeholders and interested parties.
- Investigations could be undertaken to ascertain the extent of certain underused sites (notwithstanding land ownership issues).
- Changes to Business Rates recently announced in the Budget could help new businesses and costs associated with venues. The Project team were encouraged to contact the Group Manager for Revenues and Benefits for further advice.

70 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT (00:44:38)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Planning & Economic Regeneration providing 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 following was highlighted with the report:

- The 6 week public consultation on the Local Plan main modifications had now concluded. 75 representations were received, these had been sent to the Inspector on 28 February for his consideration.
- The number of businesses supported was slightly down against target but the team had recently lost a member of staff and the quarter referred to was traditionally a quiet time of year.

A brief discussion took place regarding the risks associated with Coronavirus. This was a constantly changing and fast moving situation, for the moment the Council was continuing to operate as usual until advised otherwise by Government bodies.

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

71 **FINANCIAL UPDATE FOR THE NINE MONTHS TO 31 DECEMBER 2019 (00:49:34)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive presenting a financial update in respect of the income and expenditure so far in the year.

The Group Manager for Financial Services outlined the contents of the report stating that the figures before Members were from the Quarter 3 monitoring calculations. The forecast General Fund deficit for the current year was £292k. She highlighted some of the significant variances which had led to the new deficit figure, that of reduced overpayment recovery and software costs for Revenues and Benefits; and with regard to Trade Waste and Recycling an increase in customers and reduced discounts.

The surplus within the Housing Revenue Fund had reduced to £618k with monies being spent on disabled facilities. The appendices within the report outlined the Capital Programme.

It was the intention in future to produce financial information which was more relevant to each Policy Development Group. Loss of income from car parking and empty shops were two significant areas falling under the remit of this Group.

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

72 **NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES (BUSINESS RATES) SUMMARY REPORT (00:57:49)**

The Group had requested at their last meeting that they receive a background paper on Business Rates to aid their understanding of this area. This information included how the different types of relief were calculated and the thresholds by which Business Rates became payable and not payable. Over half of the businesses in Mid Devon were claiming Business Rate reliefs to the value of £5.2m.

Announcements made in the budget the preceding day were summarised as follows:

- Retail Relief had been increased in 2020/21 from 50% to 100% - qualifying businesses had been expanded, such as Hotels, B&B, and Holiday Lets – Hospitality generally, music venues and cinemas. It only applied to businesses with an Rateable Value (RV) of less than £51,000
- Pub Relief – Increased from £1,000 to £5,000 Rateable Value (RV) of less than £100,000
- Small Business Grant Funding – What is known so far is that those businesses with a rateable value below £12,000 could get a grant of £3,000, this apparently represented a 3 month advance on their rent. It seemed Local Authorities would be required to administer this grant.
- Public Toilet Relief – Government had said that they would try and fast track the legal changes required to make this happen. Subject to full guidance it was suggested that 100% Mandatory Relief would be paid, fully funded under s31 grant.

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

73 **'SHAPING THE FUTURE - PETROC 2020 - 2025' CONSULTATION - BRIEFING PAPER (01:07:56)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * providing information regarding a consultation being undertaken by Petroc with staff and stakeholders regarding their future strategic plan for 2020 – 2025. The first stage of the consultation was a listening exercise around 4 scenarios exploring the key themes for their future development. The scenarios were purposely provocative designed to stimulate 'blue-sky' thinking about the potential role of Petroc within the education and training sector from 2025.

The second stage would involve identifying key themes. The Council's Corporate Plan would be able to link into this since a key theme in the Economy area was working with education establishments regarding post 16 education provision.

A brief discussion took place regarding whether or not the Council should provide a response. It was also suggested that a representative from Petroc be invited to attend a future meeting of the Group once all of the consultation stages had been completed

Note: (i) * Briefing paper previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes

(ii) Cllr R Dolley declared a personal interest as he had spoken to Petroc staff regarding tourism in the area.

74 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICE UPDATE (01:13:30)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration updating members on progress with Economic Development Service activities.

It was explained that the team were just about to commence year two of the Council's Economic Strategy and reference was made to the informal meeting of this Group where Members looked at the work programme for the Growth, Economy and Delivery area. The Group had identified a number of projects which it felt needed investigation. The Cabinet was also reviewing the priorities for delivery of strategic development projects. However, these activities needed to be set against the amount of available resource.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Investment and Growth packages – the project would be re-scoped and refocused to support and promote the low carbon construction sector.
- Incubation space – MDDC had supported a bid to the ERDF which had not been successful. Alternative options were being discussed with Petroc and other partners.
- Business Awards – feedback from businesses was that it was not cost effective to pursue this, a wider conversation needed to be had as to what could be done to engage with businesses and get their support.
- The need for specific projects and outcomes to be listed rather than high level strategic aims and aspirations.
- The need for the Group to feed in any additional measures that it thought was relevant especially given the new Corporate Plan.
- The need for the towns 'health check' information to be made available to the Group at the earliest possible opportunity.
- The need for the format of the update report to be reviewed.
- The responsibility of Members in setting the economic direction of the Council.

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

75 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2019/20 (01:32:05)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a draft report * by the Chairman of the Group, a final copy of this report would be submitted to Council on 29 April 2020.

76 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:33:15)**

The following was identified for the agenda for the next meeting (as well as the items already identified in the work programme):

- Tiverton regeneration - what could be achieved in the short term, over and above the masterplan, for example, to improve the street scene. Group to consider setting up a Working Group.
- 'Healthcheck' report for each of the towns.

(The meeting ended at 7.10 pm)

CHAIRMAN