

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 10 September 2020 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

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

Also Present

Councillor(s)

R J Chesterton and R Evans

Also Present

Officer(s):

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

24 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

It was explained that Cllr D F Pugsley would not be attending the meeting as he was no longer a member of the Independent Group and therefore was not entitled to take the Independent seat on this Policy Development Group. A new allocation would be taken to full Council at the earliest opportunity in order to approve any changes to committee membership.

25 PROTOCOL FOR REMOTE MEETINGS

The protocol for remote meetings was noted.

26 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.

27 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

No interests were declared under this item.

28 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2020 were confirmed as a true and accurate record.

29 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

1. He welcomed Cllr Ben Holdman to the Group since he had recently replaced Cllr Andi Wyer as a Liberal Democrat representative and this was his first meeting. He thanked Cllr Wyer for his contribution to the work of the Group in the past.
2. A Hydro Mills planning application would shortly be presented to the Planning Committee. Environmental groups interested in this initiative were encouraged to make their representations known through the appropriate channels.
3. A company supplying fresh farm milk through vending machines in Crediton had recently won a gold medal in the Taste of the South West award scheme.

30 PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT (00:07:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security presenting it with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2020-2021 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The contents of the report were outlined with particular reference to the following:

- This was the second performance report in the current year.
- There had been limited progress on conducting counts for empty shops.
- Two of the new aims in the Corporate Plan were being progressed, these were:
 - **Work with local stakeholders to initiate delivery of the new garden village at Culm.** An engagement meeting had been held including the Connecting the Culm project.
 - **Work with developers and DCC to deliver strategic cycle routes between settlements and key destinations.**

Discussion took place regarding the empty shops within the towns:

- It was explained that there were 5 more shop vacancies in Tiverton and 2 more in both Crediton and Cullompton than last year.
- The Shop Front Scheme had enabled improvements to the appearance of some shops in Gold Street, Tiverton.
- National business chains had been affected by the pandemic such as 'Carphone Warehouse' who had now pulled out of Tiverton. However, several new businesses had opened up in Market Walk which was encouraging.
- Several businesses had opened up within Tiverton with the 'green agenda' at the heart of what they offered. Hot desking was also taking place in various premises.
- An update regarding the premises previously occupied by Londis was not available at the current time.
- The question was asked as to whether the free parking offered within the town had had an effect on footfall? This was being regularly reviewed and the number of vends being analysed. Current signs were encouraging but concern was raised as to what would happen in the winter when people would be

required to queue outside in inclement weather. This would need to be addressed.

- The use of school art work to brighten up shop fronts which were looking shabby.
- The end of the furlough scheme having an effect on the number of empty shops.
- What was being done to encourage new businesses to Mid Devon? It was explained that a number of media campaigns were underway trying to raise the profile of Mid Devon's towns.
- Nationally, the number of shop opening hours had reduced with many remaining closed at the start of each week. This was also being seen within Mid Devon towns. Concern was raised for the sustainability of businesses going forwards as a result of this and the fact that this may lead to a rise in the number of empty shops.

It was **AGREED** that further discussion take place at the next meeting regarding the number of empty shops, the 'health' of businesses within the towns and town centre regeneration generally given the current circumstances of the pandemic and local responses to it.

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

31 **FINANCIAL MONITORING (00:34:00)**

The Group Manager for Finance provided the Group with a verbal update regarding the financial position so far in the year and highlighted the following key pieces of information:

- Information was now available from 1 April to the end of July 2020 showing the effect of the pandemic on the Council's finances so far.
- As at the end of June the Council had been looking at a deficit of £1.5m, however, this had reduced to a deficit of £1.2m as at the end of July.
- In respect of the General Fund services which fell under the remit of this Group, significant income deficits were predicted in the areas of car parking, Property Services (Fore Street flats and Market Walk) and also in the Planning and Regeneration areas. Against this some salary savings had been identified and the opening up of the Leisure Centres was helping to improve the position month by month.
- A number of grant receipts had been received from central Government to help local Councils. This would include assistance under the Income Protection Scheme. The Council would receive 75p in every pound for predicted income losses over 5%. Work was currently being undertaken to predict these losses and it was anticipated that the deficit predicted of £1.2m may reduce to £0.4m as a result of the Income Protection Scheme with the balance having to be found elsewhere.
- Post lockdown recovery was continuing but the Council remained very cautious as the upward trajectory was very slow and there was still a lot of uncertainty.
- With regard to the Housing Revenue Account, the predicted deficit was just over £1m with the vast majority of this being related to the loss of housing rental income.

Consideration was given to:

- Staff costs being factored into all financial predictions.
- During the initial phase of lockdown market traders had not been charged a toll.
- According to a national survey, the Mid Devon response during these initial stages had been proportionate.
- The Tiverton Pannier Market had been a useful base from which to distribute essential food packages to those in need.

32 COVID 19 ECONOMIC RESPONSE UPDATE (00:53:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration providing members with update information regarding the Growth, Economy & Delivery team's latest COVID19 emergency, economic and community response activities. It also updated the Group on the Devon-wide economic recovery work and sought Members endorsement for the current business support and economic recovery activities.

The contents of the report were outlined, with updates provided as follows:

- The country was now officially in recession, unemployment was a particular worry with rises in the numbers of people out of work.
- It was expected that the end of the furlough scheme would lead to a significant rise in the number of people claiming unemployment benefit. The Mid Devon area currently had 9,000 people on the furlough scheme but the effect of its cessation would not be known for several months yet. The Council would work closely with DWP, local business and colleagues across the county to support and offer advice wherever possible.
- Liaising with the organisers of food banks provided a useful indicator of how the community was being affected financially.
- In terms of the Initial Emergency Response it was explained that the Discretionary and Business Grant scheme had now come to an end and the amounts that had been distributed had been communicated to Members on a regular basis throughout the pandemic.
- It was explained that, as of this week, the Government had announced a new grants scheme for local lockdowns and targeted areas. There would obviously be qualification rules but it would be possible for grants to be issued up to the sum of £1500. Pubs, for example, would be likely to qualify if they were required to close because of a local lockdown. As a precaution officers in the Growth, Economy and Delivery team plus the Revenues and Benefits area were making the necessary preparations in advance should Mid Devon become a targeted area.
- **Community Outbreak Plan:** It wasn't possible to know what a local lockdown would look like therefore a lot of contingency plans were having to be made. There would be a greater focus on 'need' rather than 'vulnerability'. Initially there had been a focus on supporting people with a medical need but often these people had been able to support themselves. The end of the furlough scheme was raising considerable concern in terms of the predicted number of people who would experience financial hardship. Greater homelessness was a particular concern. The Council was working closely with CHAT regarding food banks, money advice and plans for the future. The Government would be

providing a pot of money in the region of £757k across Devon to support financially vulnerable people. CHAT had the necessary technical and professional skills to assess applicants in terms of the eligibility to access these small grants. Up till now uptake had not been as much as expected with the local assistance fund. There had been more need for support and advice generally.

- **Town centres:** close liaison continued with Town Mayors and Town Clerks Clerks. A recent focus had been on the re-opening of schools. There had been some very positive conversations with schools especially in relation to transport, student congregation points and helpful messaging to students and parents. However, it was too early to predict how the re-opening of schools would affect COVID numbers going forwards, however, initial signs were encouraging.
- **Planning for Recovery:** 120 business across the Tiverton and Honiton constituency had registered for the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme and £128k had been claimed. The average customer spend had been £4.50. However feedback from some businesses had been that August would normally be a good month for them anyway and that really assistance was needed in the autumn and winter months. Ministers were lobbying Government at the current time to see if the scheme could be extended. Nationally there had been increases in positive COVID cases, it was vital that the team continued to work with colleagues across Devon and the Local Enterprise Partnership. The Government was frequently bringing in new approaches and schemes which local authorities were having to adapt to and deliver swiftly. This included skills support packages for those likely to be made redundant. Also initiatives for apprenticeships since there were significant concerns that younger people would be disproportionately affected by unemployment. A number of 'kick start' schemes were proposed aimed at young people and smaller businesses. The 'Solar Together' scheme was also described as an initiative designed to help with economies of scale benefiting those wanting to install solar panels. Funding initiatives, other than those already described were also listed including LEP initiatives, Inward Investment and an ERDF of £900k being made available to small and medium enterprises.
- **Recovery interventions and prioritisation:** the team were committed to getting the best funding deals for Mid Devon and in exploring all opportunities to support Mid Devon residents. The team needed to be flexible in order to respond and adapt to constantly changing circumstances. Economic recovery as a result of COVID was a top priority with other work needing to take a back seat for the moment.

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

33 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS POST COVID 19 (01:14:00)

The Group continued to request that priority be given to COVID19 related activities for the immediate future with a request that there be an item on the next agenda to specifically discuss town centre and high street regeneration as a result of the pandemic and its effect upon businesses and the number of empty shops. Performance and Risk and Financial Monitoring were also required to come to the next meeting as a matter of course.

(The meeting ended at 7.15 pm)

CHAIRMAN