

Economy Policy Development Group – 2020/2021 Chairman’s Annual Report

Overview

Firstly, I would like to give my thanks and admiration for the work of Adrian Welsh and his Growth Economy & Delivery and Community Development Teams.

They have been at the front line of the Covid pandemic for nearly a year now, administering over £40million in Business Grants Assistance helping the most needy in our District and much more.

They along with all of our staff deserve our recognition, praise and gratitude.

This last year has been catastrophic with regards to the impact of the pandemic and the implications of lockdown restrictions on the economy. As Chair I felt that it was appropriate for the Policy Development Group to focus its attention on the emergency economic response to the COVID 19 pandemic. This has taken priority over activities; however during 2020 the Group also received updates on a range of other strategic initiatives which will contribute towards economic recovery. In summary during the course of the last year the Policy Development Group has considered a number of issues including:

- regular reports providing updates on the emergency response measures and the distribution of businesses and community grants
- regular updates on the ‘Team Devon’ economic recovery work
- updates on the Heart of the South West Industrial Strategy
- various updates on Brexit
- information regarding the National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates)
- 'Shaping the Future - Petroc 2020 - 2025' consultation
- an informative presentation from the ‘Crediton Heart Project’ trustees; and
- updates regarding the proposed hydroelectric scheme at Tiverton Town Weir including a presentation from Phil Mayer from Hydromatch

As referred to above the Policy Development Group has received regular updates throughout the year with regard to COVID 19 economic response and recovery work. Some key milestones and achievements relating to this work are summarised below:

Business Grant Assistance

At the time of writing nearly £40 million of business assistance have been issued including small business rate relief. This work has been exceptionally well received by many Mid Devon Businesses and Government Ministers.

Community Response Work

During the pandemic the Economic Development Team has facilitated the Mid Devon Shielding Hub for the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable and has been managing the Covid Financial Hardship Fund. With support from staff from Leisure, Housing and Customer First the Community Support Hub has provided essential food supplies, practical support and advice to 585 vulnerable residents in need of help and delivered 236 food parcels. The Council has also been administering a financial hardship fund, in partnership with CHAT and Navigate charity, with funding from DCC and Government. The scheme continues to receive a large number of applications, with a total of 554 applications to the fund so far and has distributed over £48k in emergency relief, as well as providing signposting to other emergency support and money and debt advice.

Team Devon Recovery Work

In response to the need for economic recovery following the impacts of the pandemic organisations have been working together under the umbrella of 'Team Devon' to plan for recovery and lobby for greater investment into the County. This public and private sector partnership has drawn in expertise from business, education, skills and public sector organisations. Mid Devon Officers have been active partners in the process.

In July 2020 the 'Team Devon' partnership launched its Devon COVID 19 Economy and Business Recovery Prospectus. This document set out Devon's shared vision for economic recovery over the next two years. The plan provides a single economic programme for the County to respond to the crisis and build the Devon economy back stronger and more resilient. Work has continued during the year in refining projects for recovery focusing upon four core areas: Our Businesses, Our Places, Our People and Our Opportunities.

Exeter and the Heart of Devon Partnership

Officers from the District Council have continued to work with East Devon, Exeter and Teignbridge Councils. Much of this work is increasingly coming under the wider 'Team Devon' recovery work referred to above. Further updates will be given by Officers throughout the coming months.

Reopening our High Streets Safely

Work has been undertaken during the last year to minimise and mitigate the risk of the spread of COVID 19 in our High Streets. This has involved putting in place measures to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers, particularly in high streets. Interventions have included development of an action plan, communications/public information, business facing awareness raising activities and temporary public realm changes to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely. Liaison has taken place with the Town Councils, local businesses, schools, Devon County Council and other partners to review the risk assessments and modify proposals throughout the year. Business facing activities have included informal liaison, business survey work, webinars run in conjunction with Tiverton Town Council regarding the safe reopening

of the hospitality industry and provision of useful information on our website (e.g. risk assessment advice, posters etc). There have also been a number of press, social media and radio campaigns launched throughout the year promoting our towns and reminding visitors of important safety messages.

'Love Your Town Centre' Scheme

During the last year the District Council has launched two rounds of its pilot Love Your Town Centre initiative. This project is a funding initiative to support ideas from local businesses, town councils or organisations with projects that will help revive high streets and help them to flourish in the future. The first round was focussed on proposals generated by the Town Councils. The second was drawn from wider bids from the community. This scheme has been warmly received and it is hoped that, subject to the availability of funding, that a similar scheme will run next year.

Cullompton Town Centre Masterplan

A six week Stage 1 public consultation took place during February – April 2020 to receive comments on the baseline analysis findings and the emerging vision and objectives for the masterplan. The draft Masterplan is scheduled to be considered by Cabinet at its April 2021 meeting to seek approval for Stage 2 public consultation.

Tiverton Town Centre Masterplan

Over the last year the emerging masterplan work has been revisited to take account of the Covid-19 pandemic and to seek the opportunity to embed tackling climate change into town centre regeneration. This work is also being reviewed to consider national changes in planning policy and planning use classes. During the last few months key areas for intervention have been the subject of presentations and informal discussions with Cabinet, Ward Members, the Tiverton Town Council and the Tiverton Town Centre Partnership.

Re-opening of Cullompton Railway Station

During the last year the project to re-open railway stations at Cullompton and Wellington has made substantial progress. Mid Devon District and Somerset West and Taunton Councils were successful in securing government funding through the 'Restoring Your Railways - Idea's Fund' for development of a Strategic Outline Business Case to reopen stations at Cullompton and Wellington. An important milestone was recently achieved as the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) was submitted to the Department for Transport. This is a crucial step forward in the process of implementing improvements to the rail network. This milestone is underpinned by months of hard work, research and partnership building to develop the case for the proposed new train stations. Officers understand that our project is one of the furthest advanced of these 'ideas fund' schemes nationally and consider that the prospects of the schemes early delivery is looking increasingly likely, subject to the availability of future funding opportunities.

Cullompton Relief Road

The Cullompton Town Centre Relief Road is an important element to the infrastructure package of measures to unlock growth and improve economic prosperity of the town; in addition to providing air quality and amenity benefits to the town centre. This year saw the scheme gain planning permission and move closer towards its implementation.

Visit Mid Devon Website

When the Visit Mid Devon Website was launched a year ago we could not have envisaged that a year later the industry would be in the position it is in now. Despite these very difficult times and previously never experienced decline in the hospitality and visitor economy the website has proved a success and a platform for future economic recovery. It provides an excellent vehicle to promote the district and offers a great resource for local businesses to promote themselves. The Website was developed in partnership with Tiverton Museum, the Tourist Information Service, Petroc and Reach Plc. The initiative was one of the last projects in the County to receive European funding. The Website can be found via the following link:

<https://www.visitmiddevon.co.uk/>

Cullompton High Street Heritage Action Zone

The Cullompton High Street Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) Project Officer was appointed in September 2020. Since his appointment progress has been achieved in the following areas:

- Fore Street Grants Scheme is currently in the process of being launched.
- Higher Bullring Public Realm Enhancement scheme development work is progressing well in partnership with Devon County Council and Historic England.
- Establishment of a cultural consortium representing the current Cullompton cultural offer.
- Cultural programme bid submitted to Historic England in December 2020.
- Cullompton Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (CAMP) and Shopfront Design Guide drafted.
- A dedicated webpage on the Mid Devon website has been set up, to act as the main repository for all information related to the HAZ project.
<https://www.middevon.gov.uk/residents/planning/cullompton-high-street-heritage-action-zone/>
- A Community Engagement Plan has been prepared.

The Tiverton Pannier Market

The Tiverton Pannier Market has remained open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; but at times of national restrictions has been limited to essential food items

only. The Pannier Market has played a significant part in reacting to the pandemic at a time when many markets outside of the district have not managed to stay open. Throughout the various lockdowns the market has provided a useful base for fruit and vegetable deliveries.

Cllr John Downes
Chairman of the Economy Policy Development Group