

## **MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on 22 February 2021 at 10.30 am

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

F W Letch (Chairman)  
G Barnell, E J Berry, L J Cruwys,  
Mrs C P Daw, Mrs S Griggs, R L Stanley,  
B G J Warren and A Wilce

### **Also Present**

#### **Councillor(s)**

R J Chesterton, S J Clist, R M Deed, R J Dolley and  
Mrs M E Squires

### **Also Present**

#### **Officer(s):**

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Jill May (Director of Business Improvement and Operations), Maria De Leburne (Legal Services Team Leader), Clare Robathan (Scrutiny Officer) and Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer)

## **168 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies or substitute Members

## **169 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

Members were reminded of the need to make declarations of interest when appropriate

## **170 REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, the \*Remote Meetings Protocol.

Note: \*Remote Meetings Protocol previously circulated and attached to the minutes

## **171 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

A Member of the public asked if there was going to any good news on the Wedding Industry reopening being announced.

The Member of Parliament stated that he hoped that there would be more information in the Prime Minister's announcement due that day but he hoped that when venues opened that they could open with meaningful numbers.

## **172 MEMBER FORUM**

There were no issues raised under this item.

## 173 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

## 174 NEIL PARISH MP

The Chairman thanked Neil Parish MP for attending.

The Member of Parliament (MP) was asked the following questions:

1. Could you open by talking about the just how far behind the District is with regards to access to superfast broadband compared to other areas in England, and the impact that is having on residents?

In response, Neil Parish responded that the District was about 18 months behind and that had a lot to do with Gigaclear who had pulled out of the contract with Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS). He explained that CDS had not put contracts in place in time and that the District needed broadband delivered. He informed Members that a new company, Airband, was now in place to deliver the contract and he had spoken to the owner of the company who confirmed that the right funding was in place and they could deliver. He apologised for the delay and stated it was not something he took lightly.

2. Where do we currently stand with Connecting Devon and Somerset – do they have a workable plan? What is your view on their performance to date, and what more can we do to speed up progress?

The MP confirmed that he did think there was a workable contract. He felt that previously the performance was poor and that the Government should have taken it over, however Airband had very large investment and appeared to be fully capitalised. He stated that he would be putting pressure on CDS and would be monitoring performance and that Members could contact him directly if they had any further concerns.

3. Broadband in Tiverton is a real issue. What progress is being made in getting super-fast broadband here and to those other areas that are being left behind?

Neil Parish (MP) responded by informing Members that schemes were being picked up where places had been left behind. He explained the Gainshare funding and the voucher scheme and he had been given some assurances on flexibility. He stated that Airband would be delivering broadband through fibre optic cables into houses where possible which would be an improvement on copper wire installations.

4. Members were staggered at the number of Anaerobic Digesters in the District and that there appeared to be no cohesive policy between districts to control them. There was a lack of National Policy on Anaerobic Digesters (ADs).

The MP stated he had been in detailed discussions with Sir James Bevan, the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, with regard to the issues. He did not want to hamper local AD plants which did not import material. He was asking for legislation to bring greater powers to the Environment Agency using the national scheme. Whilst

he felt that the overall principle was a good thing, many plants were now vast and they were moving material all around the District. He was in the process of collating information on the issues across the country and felt that the Government would ultimately go for a scaled approach.

He advised Members and officers to collate the information in their areas and send it to him. He would like to know how much material was being transported around the District and what problems this was causing.

In response to a further question asked on the types and amounts of vehicles being used to carry the material, he again advised Members to send him their concerns directly and areas that they would like to see tightened up.

5. There is media coverage suggesting that meat eating is bad for the planet. How do you see the role of West Country livestock farmers in working toward Net Zero and how will they be affected? Would you agree it isn't a simple matter of switching from growing grass to rearing livestock to growing crops given the topography and climate in the South West?

The MP explained that people did not necessarily understand that permanent pasture lands held a lot of carbon and this had to be balanced with the methane from livestock. He further explained that he wanted to look at the livestock produced and the arable sector.

6. What efforts are being made to support farmers to find alternatives to pesticides (such as using integrated pest management and alternative varieties)?

In response to this question the MP explained that there was a need for alternative pesticides and that there was work going on. He felt that a move back to the traditional rotation of cereal crops could be managed and that sometimes things got over complicated on what we were trying to achieve. He stated that the bee population was needed and that practices had to adjust.

7. What are your views on the development of the Bio Energy industry in rural areas?

The MP stated that he felt that AD's in the correct setting had a role but it was all about balance. He was very excited about AD's when they were first introduced but there was a need to control what they did and how they did it. He also explained about using sewage on the land and that it needed to be treated and contained compostable plastics which never broke down.

8. Do you think that Brexit will have a negative or positive effect on the economy of Mid Devon and how will farmers and the fishing industry be supported?

The MP stated that the grant system was widening for fisherman with grants of up to £10k but there still remained a problem with shellfish. He did feel that things would get better and that gradually trade would return to normal. He stated that the UK had already got back 15% of its fishing stocks and this was due to rise to 25%.

He stated that the UK now had to look to new foreign markets and that there were other trade deals in the pipeline. He felt that the UK would do fine but needed to be more proactive.

The Chairman thanked the MP for his attendance.

(The meeting ended at 11.36 am)

**CHAIRMAN**