

## **MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 11 March 2021 at 5.30 pm

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

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

### **Also Present**

#### **Councillors**

R J Chesterton, R M Deed and R Evans

### **Also Present**

#### **Officers**

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Jenny Clifford (Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Catherine Yandle (Operations Manager for Performance, Governance and Health & Safety), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance), Dean Emery (Corporate Manager for Revenues, Benefits and Recovery), John Bodley-Scott (Economic Development Team Leader), Chris Shears (Economic Development Officer), Fiona Wilkinson (Principal Revenues & Benefits Officer), Chris Scobie (Cullompton High Street Heritage Zone Project Officer), Jason Ball (Climate and Sustainability Specialist) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

## **56 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

## **57 PROTOCOL FOR REMOTE MEETINGS**

The protocol for remote meetings was **NOTED**.

## **58 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no questions from the member of the public who was present.

## **59 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

No interests were declared under this item.

## **60 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2021 were confirmed as a true and accurate record.

## 61 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

## 62 COVID 19 ECONOMIC RESPONSE (00:06:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration providing Members with an update regarding the Growth, Economy & Delivery team's latest COVID19 emergency economic and community response activities.

The contents of the report were outlined and an update provided regarding developments since the report had been published:

- There had been a significant rise in the number of reported deaths at a national level since the last meeting. However, these numbers were now reducing.
- The vaccination programme was going well with over 23 million people having had the first dose and over 1 million having received the second dose.
- The Government's roadmap out of restrictions was summarised.
- Reference was made to work undertaken by Devon County Council in producing a graph which illustrated the economic impact of the pandemic upon Devon. It was anticipated that Mid and West Devon would take longer to emerge with potentially a time frame of between 3 and 4 years.
- Devon County Council had produced another graph showing that the accommodation and food sectors had been the hardest hit. Just over 50% of businesses within this sector only had 3 months worth of cash flow. The high street retail sector and tourism had also been badly affected within the district.
- The main concern going forwards was the potential rise in unemployment. However, it was good news that the furlough scheme had been extended. Currently approximately 10% of the Mid Devon workforce were furloughed.
- Ongoing emergency response remained a key priority. A number of grant schemes were currently running which were complex and time consuming.
- Mid Devon District Council currently ranked 14<sup>th</sup> out of 319 authorities charged with responsibility for getting discretionary funding out to businesses. This was testament to the hard work of the officers involved.
- New grant schemes were expected to emerge within the next month or two but guidance would be needed from Government as how they were to be operated and who would be eligible.
- The clinically extremely vulnerable would need to continue to 'shield' until at least 31<sup>st</sup> March although it was expected that this would date would be extended.
- An increase in applications to the Financial Hardship Fund was expected once the business grants and furlough schemes ended.
- It was anticipated that the Government would issue guidance on the practical support that could be given to those living in social isolation.
- Work continued in preparation for reopening high streets safely and mayoral meetings were being set up to follow the re-opening of non essential shops on 12<sup>th</sup> April.
- A lot of the aspects to recovery were still in a state of flux, with more information and guidance needed.

- A building grants scheme in Cullompton was nearing its launch. This would allow building owners and repairing leaseholders in the conservation area to apply for grant funding to support shopfront improvement works.
- The tendering process for the landscape project in the Bull Ring, Cullompton, would be complete by mid to late summer.
- A draft Cullompton Town Centre Masterplan would be presented to the Planning Policy Advisory Group imminently. Both the Tiverton and Cullompton Masterplans were expected to be presented to the Cabinet in May 2021.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The congratulations due to all those officers who had been involved with the dissemination of these funds to businesses.
- 100 businesses had fallen outside of the grant scheme, for example, they may have made an application too late. Assistance, advice and support to these would be dealt with on a chronological basis. These businesses would not just be left in the 'cold' but would be signposted to other agencies who could offer support if the council could not. Information had been made available on the council's website and nationally councils were lobbying Government for additional funding.
- There had been a significant growth in businesses switching to the use of online services such as 'click and collect'.
- Whilst a large number of businesses had struggled financially to continue, some had utilised grant funding to adapt their businesses in response to the pandemic.
- The effect of the pandemic on the agricultural sector would be a specific issue the PDG could discuss at a future meeting.
- More 'rapid charging' of electric vehicles was vital if people were to be encouraged to switch to purchasing this type of vehicle. It was recognised that take up was improving and the various locations within the district where vehicles could be recharged were listed.
- Devon's hospitality sector being severely affected by the pandemic, however, with the proposed lifting of restrictions, businesses had received an unprecedented number of bookings for the summer months.
- Towns needed strong leadership if they were to successfully emerge from the economic effect of the pandemic and to ensure that high streets were places that people wanted to come back to.
- Recent Covid figures for Mid Devon (and Tiverton in particular) had been very high in the statistics table for Devon with the district figures being above average. It was explained that there were complex reasons for this with the suggestion that figures could have been linked to outbreaks in education and work place settings. Statistical data needed to be treated with caution as many residents of Mid Devon travelled out of the district to their place of work. Figures were now coming down and Devon continued to show rates below the national average.

The Chairman concluded the discussion by stating that he hoped the team would be able to move from a situation of 'response' to 'recovery' in the coming months and ended by extending his personal thanks to the team for all their efforts.

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

## 63 PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT (01:16:00)

The Group had before it a report \* from the Operations Manager for Performance, Governance and Health & Safety providing Members with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2020-21 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The Group were referred to Appendix 4 which proposed a number of targets for the next financial year against the Corporate Plan Performance Framework.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The need for the Crediton Town Centre Masterplan to appear in the plan going forwards.
- The need for performance figures in relation to the Tiverton Pannier Market to be included in future reports.
- More information was needed as to why 2 acres had been identified as a target in relation to 'Sites for Commercial Development.'
- The proposed targets were still subject to some refinement before being presented to Cabinet for approval.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that the targets suggested for 2021/22 against the Corporate Plan Performance Framework be approved.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

### Reason for the decision:

If performance is not monitored the council may fail to meet its corporate and local service plan targets or to take appropriate corrective action where necessary. If key business risks are not identified and monitored they cannot be mitigated effectively.

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

## 64 FINANCIAL MONITORING (01:30:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a month 10 financial monitoring report \* which was presented by the Corporate Manager for Finance.

Key highlights within the report were listed as follows:

- The month ten reporting indicated a forecast improvement of £43k and now indicated a deficit of £46k.
- The Council was awaiting £775k being the second submission under the Income Compensation Scheme.
- There was a forecast reduction in the deficit of the Housing Revenue Account by £193k to £37k.
- £1.6m was the forecasted figure for the end of the year in terms of the amount of income which will have been lost across all streams.

The Group agreed that the figures presented to them were better than had been expected at the start of the pandemic and a lot of good work had been undertaken across the council to achieve this, however, complacency was to be avoided.

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

#### 65 **TOWN CENTRE HEALTH CHECKS (01:35:00)**

The Group received a presentation from the Cullompton High Street Heritage Zone Project Officer regarding Town Centre Health Checks.

This included information in relation to:

- Developing a template for an Annual Town Centre Health Check document and the topics that needed to be included.
- The importance of liaising with traders.
- Town Centre Use Class Survey maps.
- Monitoring vacancy rates and car park usage.
- Analysing crime data.
- Surveys of residents and shoppers
- Standardising the approach across towns

Discussion took place with regard to:

- A lot of the residents in Cullompton travelling out of the town to Exeter and Taunton to work.
- Whether there was a set of nationally recognised factors which made a town 'successful'.
- The different survey methods used to canvas local residents opinions.
- The need for a Town Centre Health Check in Tiverton and Crediton.
- Public transport issues, were they adequate?
- The need for strong leadership and partnership with stakeholders.

#### 66 **WHITE PAPER: SKILLS FOR JOBS: LIFELONG LEARNING FOR OPPORTUNITY AND GROWTH (02:00:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper \* setting out the Department of Education's vision for further (post 16) education over the next few years as the economy repositions itself following the pandemic and Brexit.

Key issues within the report were highlighted and discussion took place regarding:

- One of the main aims was to improve the quality of training.
- The district council would be a key stakeholder by getting involved or influencing improvement plans.
- The involvement of local businesses was key.
- Every opportunity needed to be explored and used to best effect.

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

67 **CHAIRMANS ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020/2021 (02:06:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a draft report \* from the Chairman of the Group on its work during 2020/2021. A final copy of the report would be submitted to Council on 28 April 2021.

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

68 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:07:00)**

Other than the items already listed in the work programme, the following was requested to be on the agenda for the next meeting:

- Update on the agricultural sector

It was noted that the EHOD Economic Development Strategy which had previously been identified as an item for future discussion would not now be coming but would be subsumed into the regular 'Team Devon' strategy updates.

(The meeting ended at 7.42 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**