

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on 19 April 2021 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

F W Letch (Chairman)
G Barnell, W Burke, Mrs F J Colthorpe,
L J Cruwys, J M Downes, Mrs S Griggs,
S J Penny, R L Stanley, B G J Warren and
A Wilce

Apologies

Councillor(s)

E J Berry

Also Present

Councillor(s)

Mrs C P Daw, R M Deed, R J Dolley, B A Moore and
Mrs N Woollatt

Also Present

Officer(s):

Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Jill May (Director of Business Improvement and Operations), Maria De Leburne (Legal Services Team Leader), Philip Langdon (Solicitor), Lisa Lewis (Corporate Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement), Catherine Yandle (Operations Manager for Performance, Governance and Health & Safety), Clare Robathan (Policy and Research Officer) and Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer)

197 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (0.03.50)**

Apologies were received from Cllr E J Berry.

198 **REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL (0.04.29)**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, the *remote meetings protocol.

Note: *Protocol previously circulated and attached to the minutes

199 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT (0.04.42)**

Members were reminded of the need to make declarations where appropriate.

200 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (0.04.50)**

Questions for Scrutiny 19/04/2021 – from Nick Quinn (Local Resident)

Concerning Agenda Items: 9 (Cabinet Member for Finance - Update)

I am surprised that this 'update' from the Cabinet Member for Finance does not mention the Millions of pounds, from the Council's cash balances, currently on loan to 3Rivers Developments Ltd.

In the last section, the Cabinet Member states that: "the Council must also continue to explore more commercial new opportunities recognising the attendant increased portfolio of risk likely to be more subject to market/demand volatility". I emphasise the use of MUST in this sentence.

Traditionally, Councils have been risk averse with their investments. Mid Devon is not being so careful - there is even a warning that "This may require that reserve levels are once again reviewed".

The Cabinet Member promises that "any such decisions will be the subject of rigorous due diligence". I hope that Scrutiny Committee will play a key role in ensuring that such "rigorous due diligence" does, in fact, take place.

Whilst mentioning "risk and volatility" in his 'update', the Cabinet Member does not make it clear what level of risk, or volatility, he considers it is acceptable to take when investing, or loaning, public money.

Nor is it obvious how the "risk and volatility" relates to the Risk Reports that are regularly passed to Committees and the Cabinet.

So I ask the Cabinet Member for Finance:

When considering investment of public money in new, or existing, commercial ventures, please could you explain;

- a) How the risk/volatility, of a potential investment/loan, is assessed?
- b) What level of risk/volatility would prevent an investment, or loan, from taking place?
- c) How the assessment of risk/volatility relates to the Risk Reports?

201 **MEMBER FORUM (0.07.40)**

Members requested a monthly update from the Chief Executive about vacancies in the Planning Department.

202 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (0.15.00)**

The minutes of the last meeting held on 15th March 2021 were approved as a correct record.

203 **DECISIONS OF THE CABINET (0.25.31)**

The Committee **NOTED** that none of the decisions made by the Cabinet on 8th March 2021 had been called in.

204 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (0.25.43)**

The Chairman informed Members that he had held a meeting with the Scrutiny Officer and Cllr Miss J Norton to progress Motion 564.

205 **CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE (0.26.33)**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, a *report from the Cabinet Member for Finance giving an update on areas within his portfolio.

The Cabinet Member thanked all staff for their work during the pandemic and stated that the final year outturn was on budget. He praised the Revenues and Benefits team for distributing grants to local businesses and informed Members that the authority topped the table in the South West for the speed in which the grants were administered.

He explained that he would provide a written response to questions asked by a member of the public.

In response to questions asked, the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) stated that negotiations were ongoing with regard to letting the large unit at Market Walk and that an announcement would be made in due course. He also informed Members that the new Covid Emergency Response officer had been seconded from the Customer Services team and was likely to be in the post for a further 18 – 24 months.

The Cabinet Member for Finance explained that initial discussion had begun regarding the potential budget deficit for 2022-2023 and that some unpalatable decisions were likely have to be made. He stated that all Members would be involved with the budget setting process and would be involved with the discussions as part of the autumn process.

Note: *report previously circulated and attached to the minutes

206 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK (0.39.30)**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, the *Performance and Risk report of the Operations Manager for Performance, Governance and Health & Safety.

The officer outlined the contents of the report and explained that the report had been seen by the PDG's and Audit Committee and that the Cabinet had agreed the proposed targets.

Consideration was given to:

- The electric car charging units were located at the leisure centres and were not solar powered
- The air source heat pump was being installed in a leisure centre
- There were currently 1180 empty homes in the district nearly 500 of which had been empty for less than 6 months. 233 empty properties were being monitored by the Housing Team at the present time to try and bring them back into use
- Property Services were currently in negotiations with a number of electric car charging providers including the current supplier
- Whether the housing delivery KPI's could be provided quarterly
- Planning enforcement was not reported as it was not a target within the Corporate Plan but was reported to the Planning Committee

- Electric car charging uses were included at the request of Members
- The effectiveness of Mental Health First Aiders would be difficult to measure as their work was confidential
- The reasons for short term sickness being reduced during the pandemic
- The reasons for the high turnover of staff
- The impact of the pandemic on staff productivity and moral
- Analysis of current working practices was taking place so that lessons could be learnt regarding the way forward
- Members comments that they had welcomed the two Cabinet Members involvement in 3 Rivers Developments Ltd
- The risk review note for Right to Buy receipts
- The plans for Town Centre regeneration would be shared with the Economy PDG

Members requested that a regular bi annual update on the Housing Infrastructure Fund and other high risk investment projects were presented to the Audit Committee.

Note: *report previously circulated and attached to the minutes

207 **MOTION 564 - (COUNCILLORS: MISS WAINWRIGHT AND MISS J NORTON – 24 FEBRUARY 2020) (1.27.56)**

The Committee had before it a *Scrutiny Proposal Form for setting up of a Spotlight Review for Motion 564 – ‘Does Local Government Work for Women’.

The Scrutiny Officer explained that a spotlight review was proposed which would look at what practices and protocols could be introduced to encourage women to be involved in local government.

She explained that a spotlight review would take place over 1 day and various people would be invited to contribute. She stated that it was an opportunity for Members to immerse themselves in a project but it would require enhanced upfront engagement from Members.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:

A spotlight review be conducted to consider and make recommendations regarding the findings of the Fawcett Society/LGiU report ‘Does Local Government Work for Women’.

The Members of Scrutiny to be involved in the spotlight review were agreed as: Cllrs F W Letch, W Burke and Mrs S Griggs

Cllr R Dolley was also co-opted onto the review.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Reason for the decision: to consider and make recommendations regarding the findings of the Fawcett Society/LGiU report ‘Does Local Government Work for Women’.

Notes:

- i.) Cllr Mrs F J Colthorpe requested that her vote against the decision be recorded
- ii.) *proposal form previously circulated and attached to the minutes

208 **UPDATE ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE WORKING GROUP (1.35.36)**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, a *report from the Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement providing an update on the Customer Experience Working Group recommendations.

The officer explained that not as much progress was made as anticipated due to the pandemic and the lack of resources which had been available. She explained that the vacancies in Customer Service had been filled but those in the IT services were proving difficult to recruit.

A CRM market exercise had taken place and it had been observed that the Authority would need to broaden the scope of the platforms available. A customer survey had been completed and the results were being collated.

The Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation and Customer Engagement explained that the implementation of the recommendations was going to be included in a wider Customer Service Improvement Program.

Members recorded their thanks to the officers for the report and recognised the difficulties experienced under the current conditions but asked that they expedite the recommendations as quickly as possible.

Consideration was given to:

- Customer Service training would be initiated first
- The CRM system should have a clear project proposal and the key deliverables should be separated out
- The business case for the CRM would include the requirement for additional resources to be able to deliver it
- Members views that a culture change would be top priority
- Members views that any system change should be user friendly

Note: *report previously circulated and attached to the minutes

209 **FORWARD PLAN (1.53.08)**

The Committee had before it and **NOTED** the *Forward Plan.

Note: *Plan previously circulated, copy attached to minutes.

210 **SCRUTINY OFFICER UPDATE (1.57.15)**

The Scrutiny officer provided an update on the Planning Enforcement Working Group and requested Members to suggest participants to the spotlight review.

211 **CHAIRMANS DRAFT ANNUAL REPORT (1.58.42)**

The Committee had before it, and **NOTED**, the Chairman's Annual Report.

The Chairman explained that there would be an update to the wording on page 104 before the report was presented to Council.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Note: *report previously circulated and attached to the minutes

212 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (2.02.30)**

Members requested the following:

- An overview of how the Programming Panel could be reintroduced
- The Draft Litter Strategy to be brought to Scrutiny before being seen by the Environment PDG
- A review of the current status of S106 funding

(The meeting ended at 4.35 pm)

CHAIRMAN