

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 15 July 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

S J Clist, R M Deed and B G J Warren

Present

Officers

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), 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), Clare Robathan (Policy and Research Officer), Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

Also in

Attendance

Andrew Butler, National Farmers Union (NFU)

1 Election of Chairman - Chairman of the Council in the Chair

RESOLVED that Cllr J Downes be elected Chairman of the Policy Development Group for the 2021/2022 municipal year.

2 Election of Vice Chairman

RESOLVED that Cllr N V Davey be elected Vice Chairman of the Policy Development Group for the 2021/2022 municipal year.

3 Apologies and Substitute Members

There were no apologies for absence.

4 Protocol for hybrid meetings

The protocol for hybrid meetings was noted.

5 Public Question Time

There were no members of the public in attendance.

6 Declaration of Interests under the Code of Conduct

No interests were declared under this item.

7 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2021 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

8 Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman informed the Group that he had attended an informal meeting of the Programming Panel recently. Following discussion with members of the Panel the general view had been that the focus for Policy Development Groups going forwards should be more on developing policy rather than receiving reports for noting.

9 Start time of meetings

The Group **AGREED** to continue to hold meetings at 5.30pm on Tuesday evenings for the remainder of the municipal year.

10 Agricultural sector update (00:15:00)

Mr Andrew Butler attended the meeting (remotely) as a representative from the NFU to provide the Group with an update on the Agricultural Sector. Via a presentation he highlighted the following issues:

- The whole food chain within the UK employed circa 4 million people.
- Supply chains had been severely impacted by the pandemic.
- There had been a significant drop in beef prices.
- The tourism sector had also suffered a significant negative impact.
- In food retail initially there had been a massive increase in demand, particularly in certain products such as long life milk and flour.
- It had been hard to move from wholesale to retail for some suppliers, different sized products for different consumers. In the early days of the pandemic there had been significant problems about matching supply with the consumer.
- Against the backdrop of high sales of minced beef, the NFU had worked hard to promote the sale of steaks which had been supported by retailers of British products.
- With Brexit there had been a significant change in the trading relationship between farmers, the Government and Europe. In the early stages exports had been down 21%. Meat and dairy had been the most complicated products to export in terms of the paperwork. However, in quarter two there had been some recovery and significant efforts had been made to secure deals with the rest of the world, Australia in particular.
- The most major concern was that food was produced at a lower standard in the rest of the world than it was within the UK, this remained a core worry for consumers.
- The Farmers Payment Scheme was due to be phased out by 2027 and this presented a major risk factor for mixed farming going forwards.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The Agricultural sector had suffered a double hit with both Brexit and the pandemic within the last 18 months.
- Whether there was a possibility of a more local abattoir in order to reduce the transport times of livestock. The costs involved with setting up an abattoir were explained including those in relation to regulation, and vets. The Group were further informed that journey time of livestock with the UK was one of the lowest in Europe. It was not ideal but the system was well controlled and regulated.
- The question was asked as to whether there was anything the Council could do to help the sector. It was explained that within the area of planning the Council could do more to support planning policies and the investment in farming. It could support 'Buy British' with its messaging as well as encouraging the public to use the countryside more responsibly.
- The price of land being a barrier to young people wanting to start a farming business. It was explained that different routes could be explored to enter the sector such as shared tenancy / farming.
- Whilst some areas within the sector remained stable in terms of prices there was a great deal of uncertainty moving forwards.
- There had been workforce pressures due the pandemic and these remained.
- Transport issues had also been a significant issue with a need for more lorry drivers transporting all elements of the sector from and to where it needed to be.
- Diversification issues and solar farms being used to produce both renewable energy and livestock grazing.

It was **AGREED** that a meeting would be set up with the NFU representative and relevant Members and officers to progress the discussion and see what could be done by the Council to support the sector further.

Note: Cllr R Dolley declared a personal interest in that he had connections within the agricultural sector and had worked for a meat production company for 15 years.

11 Meeting management (00:45:00)

The Chairman informed those present that he would be taking item 14 – Work Programming Session – as the next item of business since this would inform their discussion on a re-evaluation of the work of the Group going forwards.

12 Work programming session (00:50:00)

The Scrutiny Policy and Research Officer provided the Group with a summary of the discussions that had taken place at a recent informal Programming Panel meeting and reminded the Group, by way of presentation, of the issues which fell under the umbrella of the 'Economy' area within the Constitution and the Corporate Plan. The purpose of the meeting had been to start a conversation about a co-ordinated approach to work programming across the Council and provided an opportunity for each Group to be ambitious towards achieving its goals within the Corporate Plan.

The Chairman introduced the discussion by explaining that this provided a seed change opportunity. By way of a first step he suggested that the Performance and Risk and Financial Monitoring reports be presented to them on a much less regular basis, perhaps only once a year, however, it was recognised that the Group would still need to be involved in the annual budget setting process. He further explained that it may be necessary to set up a number of working groups to focus on particular issues in order to achieve the realigned goals of the Group.

Consideration was given to:

- The need to use officer time more efficiently
- Performance & Risk and financial monitoring was reported regularly to the Scrutiny Committee, the Audit Committee and the Cabinet. Members could always attend those meetings and if there was an issue of concern they could bring them to the relevant Policy Development Group.
- A need to think 'outside the box' and not continue with the pattern of reporting that Policy Development Groups had fallen into.
- The need for cross Policy Development Group working and an exchange of ideas. This could be supported by more regular meetings of the Programming Panel.
- The need for confidence on the officers 'to do their job' with less regular scrutiny.

It was **AGREED** that following the next formal meeting of the Programming Panel and the discussions to take place therein, the September meeting of the Economy PDG would explore work programming ideas further.

Note: * Work programming slides previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

13 **Covid 19 Local Economic Recovery Plan (01:15:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration updating members on recovery activities undertaken to date and setting out a proposed way forward with regard to the preparation of a districtwide COVID 19 Economy Recovery Plan.

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

- The three key stages of the local response to the economic impact of the pandemic across Mid Devon:
 - Stage one: Covid 19 Emergency Response
 - Stage two: Initial Recovery Response
 - Stage three: Longer Term Economic Recovery
- The current Economic Strategy document actions would need some refinement as a result of the pandemic. Long term recovery would need to maximise opportunities to 'Build Back Better' whilst also recognising the Council's commitment to Climate Change.
- There would also be a need to recognise the Council's limitations, maximise partnership working opportunities and a need to prioritise work streams within available resources.

- The involvement of the Group was pivotal to the formulation of the recovery plan. The report proposed that a series of workshops be set up to allow Members of the Group the opportunity to delve into the five key intervention areas previously identified as part of the Economic Strategy work, these being, Employment and Skills, Place, Infrastructure, Hi-Tech, Innovation & Green Energy and Agriculture, Food and Drink. Each of these workshops would be held to link into formal Policy Development Group meetings over the remainder of the municipal year.

Consideration was given to:

- The Council's direct influence over highways issues was limited but it was able to lobby the appropriate people.
- The need to be engaged in all available avenues to apply for funding and investment.
- Due to budgetary pressures it had not been possible to appoint a Town Centre Manager at the current time.
- The proposed workshops would need to be focussed in terms of what could realistically be achieved and how to achieve it. The sessions would need to be well thought through with some refinement along the way if necessary.

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

14 **Performance & Risk Outturn Report (01:33:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Chief Executive providing Members with the outturn on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2020/2021.

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

15 **Financial Outturn Report 2020/2021 (01:35:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting the Revenue and Capital Outturn figures for the financial year 2020/2021. This had previously been presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 6th July 2021.

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

16 **Identification of items for the next meeting (01:37:00)**

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

- Looking into forming a relationship with the agricultural sector through the NFU.
- Progress work in relation to the Incubation and Start Up Business Initiatives previously identified by the Group.
- Working with Petroc to support the 'Employment & Skills' intervention area.

(The meeting ended at 7.12 pm)

CHAIRMAN