

Economy Policy Development Group – 2021/2022

Chairman's Annual Report

Overview

- 1.1 The last twelve months have been another difficult year for Mid Devon's businesses. The beginning of this financial year was encouraging and saw the start of easing of restrictions with many more businesses being allowed to reopen in April and by July most restrictions had been lifted. However, the onset of winter and the rapid increase in Covid cases arising from the new Omicron variant led to a combination of increased restrictions, uncertainty and consumer nervousness which hit many of our businesses hard. As a result, 2022 started with the Growth Economy and Delivery team again having to prioritise the distribution of government grants over 'business as usual' activity.
- 1.2 2021/22 has therefore been another year whereby the Policy Development Group has had to continue to focus its attention on the emergency economic response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The group has however, also started the process of considering how the District Council may wish to prioritise its work in contributing towards positive longer term local economic change given its constrained resources and limited role. This latter work has, to date, involved informal meetings with representatives from Devon County Council's Economic Development Team, The National Farmers' Union, Airband and Petroc.
- 1.3 This emerging work has given the Group the opportunity to respond positively to the Programming Panel's recommendations that Policy Development Group's should be developing policy rather than receiving reports for noting. I have also asked that Performance and Risk and Financial Monitoring reports be presented on a much less regular basis, in an attempt to place greater emphasis on policy development at our meetings and to ensure we make more efficient use of officer time.
- 1.4 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 covid-19 emergency response measures and the distribution of businesses and community grants;
 - regular updates on the 'Team Devon' economic recovery work;
 - a presentation from the National Farmers' Union;
 - a presentation on Taste Mid Devon;
 - a presentation on Doughnut Economics;
 - reports regarding Peninsula Transport's: Regional Transport Strategy Vision Consultation, and;

- a presentation from 'Hardisty Jones' reviewing the potential for urban renewal in Devon's Coastal and Market Towns

1.5 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. The following paragraphs are far from being an exhaustive list of Economic Development activities and achievements over that last year but highlight just a few of the initiatives that have been considered by the Policy Development Group:

Business Grant Assistance

1.6 Throughout the pandemic, the Economic Development team supported businesses through a series of Government-funded grant schemes. Up until 31st July 2021, when the main schemes closed, 2,298 businesses had been supported with the distribution of nearly £40 million in business assistance including small business rate relief.

1.7 The team continues to support businesses hit by the upsurge in Omicron cases over the Christmas period through the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant Scheme and Additional Restrictions Grants: Omicron Scheme. These two schemes have now closed to new applications and all grants will need to be processed by the end of March.

Community Response Work

1.8 Although the practical community support provided during the pandemic ended in July 2021, the Council has continued to provide financial support through the Local Financial Hardship Fund, in partnership with CHAT and Navigate Charity. Up until October 2021 the fund received 914 applications and distributed £136,859 in financial support to those economically impacted by the pandemic. In October 2021, the Government announced further funding through the Household Support Fund to support households through the winter. The Household Support Fund continues to receive a large number of applications. Since October, the fund has received 678 applications and distributed over £128k in emergency relief. This will be the last of the Government funded schemes and will close before the end of March 2022, although we see no reduction in the level of need.

1.9 In January this year the team was also asked to co-ordinate a community response to support the 71 Asylum Seekers, accommodated at Tiverton Hotel, as part of the Government's Initial Asylum Seekers Accommodation. This has involved working with community partners to ensure the Asylum Seekers have the necessary clothes and other necessities, and organising community drop-in sessions with leisure activities and specialist advice.

Love Your Town Centre' Scheme

- 1.10 During the last year the District Council launched two rounds of Love Your Town Centre funding. Both rounds received bids from local businesses, town councils or organisations across Crediton, Cullompton and Tiverton, with proposals to generate and support the town centres economic recovery. The scheme has proved vital this year, providing funding for quick-win projects and supporting footfall return to the town centres, which has been welcomed by community groups.

Visit Mid Devon

- 1.11 The website has been a useful tool to support our leisure, tourism and hospitality businesses this year. In order to help our businesses through the recovery period we have offered free business listings on the website. It has enabled us to build a good relationship with the sector and identify how we can help them going forward. We have recruited 136 Mid Devon businesses to date, including eateries, attractions and accommodation providers – these sectors been amongst those hit hardest by the pandemic. We have doubled the number of hits to the website this year. One reason for the increase was the Taste Mid Devon campaign we launched, which promotes Mid Devon's rich food and drink offer. You can visit the website at www.visitmiddevon.co.uk

Infrastructure: Re-opening of Cullompton Railway Station

- 1.12 Given the close relationship with enhanced infrastructure provision and economic prosperity the Growth, Economy and Delivery Team continue to be involved in a number of infrastructure projects. Last year the Policy Development Group contributed towards the emerging Regional Transport Strategy Vision. Members look forward to continued involvement with both Peninsular Transport and Devon County Council during the next stages of the Strategy's development.
- 1.13 A notable recent success, with regard to infrastructure delivery, has been progress with regard to the project to re-open railway stations at Cullompton and Wellington. Further to the submission to Government of a Strategic Outline Business Case early last year the project has been successful in securing £5m of 'Restoring Your Railway, Rail Network Enhancements' funding – the funding split between the two station projects. This funding will allow the projects to progress at speed, developing a Final Business Case (FBC) and completing the first stages of the Government's new accelerated process towards rail infrastructure delivery (PACE).
- 1.14 The project is now in the process of transferring the lead role from the two District Councils (MDDC and SWTC) to Network Rail. Developing this project in partnership to a stage that the rail industry can now take it forward is a notable achievement.

Cullompton High Street Heritage Action Zone

1.15 Over the last year the following has been achieved:

- Higher Bullring Public Realm Enhancement scheme concept design work is underway following the appointment of consultants last autumn, in partnership with Devon County Council and Historic England.
- The Cultural Consortium 'Creative Cullompton' were successful in their bid to Historic England and awarded a grant of £90,000 to support local cultural and historic activities in the town centre as part of the HAZ project.
- The updated Cullompton Conservation Area Appraisal (CAMP) has been completed.
- The Building Grants Scheme is progressing and the HAZ Officer is working with owners of various properties to develop eligible projects for funding. Properties have been identified following a Condition Survey and the preparation of a Building Priority list.

The Tiverton Pannier Market

1.16 Despite it being another challenging year for retailing as a result of the pandemic, the Tiverton Pannier Market has remained open. 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. Occupancy levels at the market have now returned to pre-pandemic levels. Even though it is a difficult time for retail, with additional restrictions being lifted and a number of events and initiatives planned throughout year, the future looks a little more encouraging for the Pannier Market in 2022.

1.17 With the above in mind, 2021/22 has been a successful year, and I look forward to continuing with the initiatives that we have begun this year and to identifying other opportunities to support growth in the district in the year ahead. Members will be aware that, at the last PDG meeting, I set out a strong desire to move this PDG towards more proactively pursuing opportunities for growth and income generation within the district, and that is something which I will be keen to progress in earnest in the year ahead.

1.18. Finally, I would like to put on to public record my thanks to all officers who have driven forwards such important work over the course of the last year in very challenging circumstances.

Cllr John Downes
Chairman of the Economy Policy Development Group