

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on 12 December 2022 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

S J Clist (Chairman)
G Barnell, W Burke, L J Cruwys, F W Letch,
S Pugh, Mrs E J Slade and B G J Warren

Apologies

Councillor(s)

E J Berry, Mrs E J Lloyd and A Wilce

Also Present

Councillor(s)

Mrs S Griggs, J Buczkowski, Mrs C P Daw, R M Deed,
R J Dolley and C J Eginton

Also Present

Officer(s):

Richard Marsh (Director of Place), Jill May (Director of Business Improvement and Operations), Dean Emery (Corporate Manager for Revenues, Benefits and Recovery), Lisa Lewis (Corporate Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement), Fiona Keyes (Operations Manager for Revenues Benefits & Recovery) and Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer)

53 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (0.04.23)**

Apologies were received from Cllr E J Berry, Cllr E J Lloyd and Cllr A Wilce who was substituted by Cllr B G J Warren.

Cllr S Griggs attended via ZOOM.

54 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT (0.04.45)**

Members were reminded of the need to make declarations where appropriate

55 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (0.05.00)**

There were no questions from members of the public present.

56 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (0.05.16)**

The minutes of the last meeting were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

57 **DECISIONS OF THE CABINET (0.08.46)**

The Committee **NOTED** that none of the decisions made by the Cabinet on 29th November 2022 had been called in.

58 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (0.08.58)

The Chairman provided Members with an overview of a recent visit he had made to an Anaerobic Digester (AD) Plant with the Corporate Manager for Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Recovery, Planning (DM), and Corporate Fraud to which all members of the Committee had been invited.

He stated that they were given a 3 hour guided tour, hosted by the owner and that he had questioned the owner extensively who had answered transparently. He had seen all parts of the operation and had discussed with the owner how Parish Council disapproval had been dealt with.

The Chairman explained that it was a very well run family owned plant which had received an investment of £28m to date. The owner had self-imposed regulations including a traffic plan which limited any vehicle movements during school run times. There were 50 locally sourced staff employed on the site and production had not been capped through any planning conditions.

During discussions with the Committee consideration was given to:

- Some Members did not agree that local AD plants were run the same as the one visited and expressed concerns that they were dangerous and unhealthy for local residents
- Concerns about the bio industry as a whole and the traffic caused in local areas
- Concerns that the Carbon Footprint of such plants had not been assessed
- Concerns that there were not any measures to test how eco-friendly the plants are

Notes

- Cllr Mrs E J Slade declared a personal interest as she lived in a village affected by an AD Plant
- Cllr B G J Warren declared a personal interest as he was Ward Member for Lower Culm

59 COST OF LIVING CRISIS (0.32.38)

The Committee received and **NOTED** a verbal update from the Corporate Manager Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Recovery, Planning (DM), and Corporate Fraud on the cost of living crisis.

The officer stated that people in the District had a lot of issues with the cost of living crisis and he detailed the help currently available including:

- Housing Support Fund 3 - £21k already spent providing fuel and food vouchers which were being issued by charities CHAT and Navigate. Fund will run until the end of March 2023.
- Housing Support Fund 4 was coming but the Government had not yet provided any details
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme- current spend £3.8m
- Exceptional Hardship Scheme – current spend £15k
- Discretionary Housing Fund – current spend £30k

Consideration was given to:

- The Government was launching an alternative fuel scheme for households not in receipt of the £400 energy payment. These were properties classed as 'off grid' and included farmers in domestic houses, park home residents, caravans and houseboats etc. Details of the scheme would be announced in January
- The funding for Community Grants, of which CHAT and CAB were recipients had been reviewed in 2020 and the level of funding had been set for 2 years. Both CHAT and Navigate had received additional funding to administer the Housing Support Fund

60 **UPDATE ON THE PLANNING ENFORCEMENT WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS (0.50.00)**

The Committee received and **NOTED** a verbal update from the Corporate Manager Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Recovery, Planning (DM), Corporate Fraud on the Planning Enforcement Working Group Recommendations.

The officer stated that a lot of work had been completed including an increase in officers and temporary contractors. The team was currently concentrating on high profile cases and had reduced the backlog of cases and were currently running at 290 live cases.

The team were piloting debt enforcement agents to help collect information which could then be passed to enforcement officers to deal with. This had been negotiated at no extra cost to the Council. More notices had been served and there was a positive enforcement approach to high profile cases.

The officer confirmed that work was underway for Enforcement Officers and Planning Officers to work together to ensure that planning conditions imposed on future planning applications were both realistic and enforceable.

Consideration was given to:

- The number of Enforcement Officers was not likely to increase and it was a reasonable capacity for an Authority of this size noting that enforcement is a discretionary service
- The fact that, despite the fact enforcement is discretionary, MDCC took enforcement seriously
- Low grade enforcement would be targeted through the new contract with the debt enforcement agents who collected the data about possible planning breaches
- A agency Planning Solicitor was working 2 days a week and a permanent role was currently being advertised
- A sub group of the Planning Committee had not been implemented as Planning Enforcement cases were being monitored by the Cabinet Member for Continuous Improvement
- The free planning advise line had been discontinued as the Council was seeking to encourage the pre application service which was a discretionary chargeable service

61 **WORK PROGRAMME (1.24.24)**

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

The Chairman advised that a recent Scrutiny proposal to look into the determination of Council planning applications was not the remit of the Scrutiny Committee and that the Planning Committee had been provided with training and advice on how to deal with these applications. He confirmed that the proposal would not be brought to the Scrutiny Committee.

There was a request that the Cabinet attend a future Scrutiny Committee to discuss the competence of 3 Rivers Developments Ltd.

Note: *Forward Plan and Work Plan previously circulated and attached to the minutes

(The meeting ended at 3.52 pm)

CHAIRMAN