

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 12 January 2023 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

J M Downes (Chairman)
Mrs C Collis, N V Davey, R J Dolley,
R Evans, Mrs S Griggs, R F Radford and
S J Clist

Apology

Councillor

J Wright

Also Present

Councillors

R J Chesterton and D R Coren

Also Present

Officers

Richard Marsh (Director of Place), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance), Lisa Lewis (Corporate Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement), Zoë Lentell (Economic Development Team Leader), Christie McCombe (Area Planning Officer), Andrew Seaman (Member Services Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

37 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Apologies were received from Cllr J Wright who was substituted by Cllr S Clist.

38 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no members of the public present and none had registered to ask a question in advance.

39 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

Cllr S Clist declared a personal interest in that he was a member of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

No other interests were declared under this item.

40 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2022 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

Note: At the previous meeting the Group had requested further information be supplied with regard to gross median salary figures. It was explained that generally rural areas fared worse than urban ones. Officers had sought clarification from

colleagues at Devon County Council and had been informed that the gross median salary figure for Mid Devon had risen to 9.6%. For Devon as a whole this had risen to 8.5% and nationally, 7.1%. These figures were to be viewed within the context of a national inflation rate of nearly 11%.

41 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

42 **AGRICULTURAL OVERVIEW (00:04:54)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Place providing Members with an overview of the key challenges facing the agricultural sector and set current areas of activity within the District Council as requested by this Group.

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

- Agriculture was a key element within the local economy.
- The report set out the challenges facing the sector, for example, labour shortages and animal feed costs.
- The Council's sphere of influence was limited but they had a role to play as the Local Planning Authority, in Public Health and the Climate Change agenda. The Economic Development function of the Council was also able to support the sector through accessing available funds and website promotion of local producers.
- The NFU would be having an informal meeting with the Planning Committee shortly.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The average age of farmers was 60 years and 3 months.
- There were opportunities for the Council in the future to influence policies through the new Local Plan.
- Diversification, where possible, was essential.
- Animal welfare fell under the control of DEFRA but it was noted that the UK had extremely high welfare standards and there were stringent checks on all areas of farming activity.
- Increasing the size of a farm was not always the right answer.

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

43 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE REPORT (00:28:15)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Place updating Members on activities undertaken by the Economic Development Team during the last quarter.

An update was provided in relation to the Shared prosperity Fund, unemployment statistics, town centres and destination management work undertaken by the team since the last meeting.

Consideration was given to:

- The HRA had identified a number of possible sites for housing, however, those that were not deemed to be suitable could be considered for the siting of small business units. A Business Plan was needed. It was confirmed that officers had started discussions on such sites and there was a clear intention to support innovation and significant amounts of funding had been allocated.
- There were timetable challenges and projects needed to be assessed as being viable.
- Partnership working and the sharing of knowledge was key.
- The team did provide help and support to businesses and their websites and would be looking to provide more digital support through the Shared Prosperity Fund.

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

44 **TIVERTON TOWN CENTRE MASTERPLAN SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT AND DELIVERY PLAN (00:41:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Director Place reminding Members that they would be aware that this authority has previously undertaken work with regard to regeneration and investment masterplanning for Tiverton town centre. This report sought to provide an update to Members with recommendations in association with work being undertaken by the Coastal and Market Towns Initiative, Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund.

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

- The primary reporting mechanism for masterplanning activity would continue to be the Planning Policy Advisory Group (PPAG), however, there were strong links with the SPF hence bringing a report to this Group.
- A list of initial and future projects were shown to the Group via a presentation.
- Key milestones were also listed for the Groups information.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Current assets within the district such as Palmerston Woods.
- Attention needing to be paid to the current list of projects such as Market Walk.
- A hope that the masterplanning exercise would be complete by the end of 2023 as stated within the timescale of the presentation.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

- (i) A budget of up to £60k is set aside from the Brown Field Register Fund (up to £35k) and Custom and Self Build Burdens Fund (up to £25k) for the completion of the Draft Masterplan SPD and accompanying Delivery Plan;
- (ii) That Officer's commence the process to engage consultants to complete the Tiverton Town Centre Masterplan SPD and Delivery

Plan process including commissioning assessments as required; and that

- iii) The timetable for the adoption of the Tiverton Town Centre Masterplan and Delivery Plan be agreed.

(Proposed by Cllr Cllr B Evans and seconded by Cllr N V Davey)

Reason for decision

As set out within the report.

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

45 UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND & RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND DELIVERY PLAN (01:01:50)

The Group had before it a report * from the Director of Place updating members on the proposed delivery plan for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF), approve year 1 spend (2022/23) and approve delegated authority to the Director of Place, in conjunction with Cabinet Members, to approve the detailed SPF Policy and any accompanying guidance materials.

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

- The year one delivery plan.
- The need for an overarching SPF and consistency across Devon.
- The need for delegated authority in order to quickly adjust spending budgets should that be needed.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The short timescales imposed by central government being extremely disappointing and a hindrance to the proper administration of the scheme.
- Valuable health checks now being undertaken in the town centres of the district.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that it:

- 1) Approves the UKSPF expenditure & Delivery Plan for Year One (2022/23) as outlined throughout the report.
- 2) Approves delegated authority to the Director of Place, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Finance, to finalise the detailed SPF Policy & grant arrangements;
- 3) Approves delegated authority to the Director of Place, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration, to approve variations to the Delivery Plan, Investment Plan and/or grant scheme criteria.

(Proposed by Cllr B Evans and seconded by Cllr S Clist)

Reason for decision

As set out within the report.

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

46 **2023/ 24 BUDGET UPDATE REPORT (01:08:15)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive. The Local Government Finance Act 1992 places a legal requirement on the Council to approve a balanced budget. The first draft of the General Fund budget for 2023/24 indicated a deficit of £960k. This report updates that deficit to the current position of £905k and proposes options to consider to achieve the statutorily required neutrality.

Key highlights within the report were as follows:

- This Group had an income generating budget thereby making the identification of savings difficult.
- The draft budget still had a residual gap with inflation, not grant cuts, being the chief cause.
- Other influencing factors included the rise in energy costs, a rise in pension contributions and slightly lower Council Tax income due to the loss of any surpluses.
- Towns and Parish Council's had been approached to discuss service provision in relation grass cutting and play parks, however, there had not been a great deal of response so far.
- Pay assumptions had been reviewed as had Business Rate income and the Asset Management Programme.
- This Group had an opportunity to assess income generation in the coming year.
- The turnover of staff and vacancy assessment. A robust process was in place to assess each vacant post in terms of income generating opportunities and health and safety risks.
- Some areas of the Council's activity needed to be topped up going forwards such as providing sufficient budget for Planning Appeals.
- The outcome of 3 Rivers Ltd was not yet known.

Discussion took place with regard to the measurement of the SPF and the REPF being evidenced by the successful delivery of these programmes. This was dependent on having the necessary resources in place.

It was therefore:

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the Economic Development team be considered a high priority service area which should be protected and recognised as generating income for the Council at a high ratio.

(Proposed by Cllr B Evans and seconded by Cllr N V Davey)

Reason for decision

As set out within the report.

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

47 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:44:00)

The following items were identified by the Group as needing to come to a future meeting:

- A car parking revenue review. An analysis of the charging mechanism and service generally.
- A report in relation to the allocation and monitoring of S106 monies.

(The meeting ended at 7.25 pm)

CHAIRMAN