

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 16 November 2023 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

J M Downes (Chairman)
G Cochran, A Cuddy, B Fish, M Fletcher,
L Knight, N Letch, R Roberts and
G Westcott

Apology

Councillor

M Farrell

Also Present

Councillors

D Broom and J Buczkowski

Also Present

Officers

Richard Marsh (Director of Place), Matthew Page (Corporate Manager for People, Governance and Waste), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change), Dean Emery (Corporate Manager for Revenues, Benefits and Recovery), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager), Luke Howard (Environment and Enforcement Manager), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Zoë Lentell (Economic Development Team Leader), Laura Woon (Democratic Services Manager), David Parker (Democratic Services & Policy Research Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online

E Buczkowski, A Glover, S Keable, J Wright and D Wulff

34 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr M Farrell who was substituted by Cllr L Knight.

35 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Mrs Kate Clayton-White

After attending Full Council meetings and Economy PDG meetings earlier this year we managed to persuade you to reconsider your outrageous proposed increases for

our allocated parking spaces. We were delighted to hear you set up a working group involving town traders and other interested parties who have already produced a report update for this meeting which recommends that the Council supports traders by offering some free parking before Xmas however allocated spaces charges aren't actually mentioned at all.

One of our main concerns had been the fact that previously, the decision making process including discussion of fees which resulted in a 115% increase for our allocated space, was concealed in part 2 minutes, i.e. in secret. On 22nd February this year at the full Council meeting I asked what was so commercially sensitive about raising car parking charges that the decision making process had to take place in secret. The answer I received was 'The majority of the council's fees and charges were considered together by Cabinet and therefore the decision was taken to consider all fees in part 2 session. Future review of car parking fees will take place in normal part 1 session'.

Note, my question – why was it necessary to discuss these matters in secret – wasn't actually answered – nor was it when I asked again on 4th April.

The agenda for today's meeting suggests that discussion of fees and charges for 2024/25 will take part in part 2 session. If this includes the proposed car parking increase then this would directly contradict what was promised, in writing, in your answer to my question in February and make a mockery of this new administration's vow to be more transparent than the last.

So my questions are:

1. Are car parking fee increases going to be discussed, as originally promised, in normal part 1 sessions? If not, why not?
2. Why were such discussions previously deemed to be commercially sensitive and hidden in part 2?
3. Where in the Parking Consultation Terms of Reference and pressing matters (Car Park Working Group update report 3.3) will the needs of allocated space fee payers be considered?

Answer

The Corporate Manager for People, Governance and Waste stated that the Terms of Reference for the Working Group could be added to at any time as they were still being developed. They were not set in stone. The Group were very keen to talk to business leaders and community groups to further inform their discussions and this would be taking place. The Chairman further informed those present that no recommendations were being made this evening based on the work of the Working Group, the report included with the agenda was just providing an update. The main focus of the proposals regarding fees and charges for this evenings meeting were based on inflation based rises.

It was recognised that the car parking issues had not been handled in a way which current Members were happy with last year and that things would be managed very differently going forwards. He reiterated the fact that inflationary increases had now been delegated to the S151 Officer and all other matters would be discussed openly.

The Chairman of the Working Group stated that they had only met once and had not yet prioritised the Terms of Reference. The main objective was to ensure that, having consulted with the community, there were practical recommendations regarding fees going forwards.

Paul Elstone

(Answers were provided by the Cabinet Member for Finance in each case)

Question 1

This item is being discussed in secret, but the report has been published and Paragraph 2.2 says it is proposed to increase Fees and Charges by the September Consumer Price Index inflation rate of 6.7%.

Everybody knows that inflation is coming down. It was on the news headlines yesterday that the rate had dropped to 4.6% and for this Council to set an increase at 6.7% is excessive by any reasonable measure.

Fees and Charges should only go up by any increase in the cost of the service and only last month the Council was being told that costs are being cut.

In the secret papers, have the Officers provided costs of the services that charge these Fees and Charges to prove that an increase of 6.7% is necessary for each item?

Answer

The appendices only include the recommended fees and charges and the additional income generated.

I would highlight again that as part of the fee setting during the last review of fees and charges, delegated authority was given to the Deputy Chief Executive to increase fees and charges by at least inflation.

In regards to the inflation point being used, it is important to recognise that it has been higher than this earlier in the year. The September figure represents the mid-point for the year and is also the latest CPI available at the time of drafting the proposal, and is the Central Governments measure used when calculating national schemes such as pensions and business rates.

Question 2

Expert institutional financial forecasting and including the UK Governments own anticipates that CPI inflation will drop to around 3% by the middle of next year and down to the Government's 2% target by the middle of 2025. Therefore, further the challenging the justification for the excessive 6.7% price rise that this Committee is asked to approve.

Will this Committee fully factor this into its decision making and during the secret debate ?

Answer

I've addressed the question around the inflation rate as part of my previous answer,

You are asking the PDG to consider your comments in their deliberations, I can't speak on their behalf, but I am sure they will do.

Question 3

In the secret papers, have the Officers provided costs of implementing this increase across all the Fees and Charges ?

Answer

The appendices only include the recommended fees and charges and the additional income generated. The cost of implementing any change to the fees and charges are relatively minimal, largely the cost of advertising and printing new tariffs.

Question 4

When this Committee votes on the recommendation to take back to Cabinet will this vote be conducted in public?

Answer

Yes, there will be a vote in public session,

Question 5

What Fees / Charges are being considered?

Answer

Car Parking and the Panier Market.

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

There were no interests declared under this item.

37 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 5 October 2023, were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

38 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had no announcements to make:

39 **BUSINESS SUPPORT PROGRAMME - GUEST SPEAKER (00:20:00)**

Mr Rob Evans, from Devon County Council had been invited to attend the meeting to provide an update on the Business Support Programme.

The presentation included the following information:

- What the Business Support Programme was and how businesses could sign up to it.
- It provided, general business support, green business support, start up support, job creation and job safeguarding support.
- Support would be delivered through 1-2-1's, workshops, events, enterprise clubs and through a new self-learning platform.

- There had been 32 Mid Devon referrals to date, against a target of 89. The focus would now be ensuring businesses were targeted that would achieve the specific programme outcomes.
- Shared Prosperity Fund Agri-Events project.

Consideration was given to:

- The proactive attempts to reach out to business via such means as providing work hubs, contact with libraries, sending out flyers, working with local authorities etc.
- Success being measured in terms of outcomes.

It was requested than an update be provided to the Group in 6 months time and that top level information (including relevant links) be sent to all Members so that they could share it with their networks.

40 **CAR PARKING CONSULTATIVE GROUP UPDATE REPORT (00:30:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the car Parking Working Group. This Group had been founded in response to concerns regarding the decision making process in relation to car parking tariff increases proposed in 2023 as well as the lack of consultation with local business leaders and representatives. This decision to create the group was made in March 2023 by this PDG to better inform future proposals on parking charges in the years to come.

The Chairman of the Working Group, Cllr Guy Cochran, outlined the contents of the report and provided the following summary:

- The Working Group was open to any suggestion in terms of underused locations that could be used as possible car parking areas or for other uses that could generate some income.
- The need to look ahead, mindful that cycling was on the increase for example.
- The Working Group were meeting again on 4th December 2023.
- A further update would be provided in due course.

The Chairman of the Policy Development Group stated the need for interested parties to contact either this Group or the Working Group so that their views could be heard and they could get involved. He was keen to stress that in the past the Finance Officers had presented options the Group as part of the budget process with little other opportunity for Member or public involvement. This new approach would provide ample opportunity for involvement and he welcomed this.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

41 **QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD (00:37:00)**

The Group were presented with a performance dashboard slide showing performance against targets in the Economic Development area in the financial year to date.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The need to present the financial data in a slightly different way so as to be easier to understand and a more accurate reflection of the 'economic' health of the Council. It was explained that this slide was a work in progress and that it could be tailored so as to be more helpful to the PDG Members. At the moment it was not very helpful to see 'zero' as a target.
- The Group requested to see the net impact figures going forwards.
- It was still important to see the slippage on capital projects, the biggest one being the Cullompton Relief Road.
- The risks in relation to 3 Rivers should be removed from this area.
- The entire Corporate Risk area would be reported to the Audit Committee.
- The Chairman requested that 'RAG' be amended to say 'RISK'.
- The risk scoring system was explained to those who had not come across it before.
- The difference between the risk scores of the Cullompton Garden Village and the Cullompton Relief Road was explained, one was dependent on the other but the risk on the Garden Village had increased owing to a lack of clarity on Government grant funding to support the Council in its work.
- It was confirmed that 6.25% of commercial premises were currently voids.

42 **SHARED PROSPERITY FUND AND RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND PROGRESS UPDATE (00:52:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Place updating Members on the progress under the Shared Prosperity Investment Plan and the Rural England Prosperity Fund (Year 2: 2023/2024).

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

- Project delivery had focussed on, 'Love your Town Centre', 'Field to Fork', 'Visitor Economy', 'Work Hubs', and 'Business Innovation and Growth'.
- The report provided summary information in relation to each project as well as achievements to date against the targets set.
- Updates would be brought to the March 2024 PDG meeting regarding several promotional campaigns such as the 'Swan Sculpture Trail' and the 'Walking Festival', the webpage for the latter having now gone live.

Consideration was given to:

- It took approximately one month from application to grant offer for Shopfront Scheme applicants should they be successful. It was confirmed that grants were paid on completion of the works.
- Applications Under all grant schemes needed to be of high quality and comply with certain criteria. The team were able to provide guidance and support in advance of applications being submitted if needed. The team also needed to hear from individuals and businesses if there were issues preventing them from filling in the necessary forms correctly.
- Lots of different types of business support was available.
- The team worked very closely with Planning regarding reviews of the Local Plan.

- The chief priority was to get all the available funding out to businesses wherever possible.
- Applicants submitting planning applications were contacted and made aware of any relevant schemes in order to support business growth.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

43 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE (01:15:00)**

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 two months.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- Businesses are able to access green business advice through the Prosper business support programme. The Team will use the LGF to extend the green business support through the provision of capital grants to help businesses implement actions that reduce their carbon emissions. The introduction of the grant scheme will enable businesses to apply the knowledge gained from the support workshops, generating additional impact from those support interventions.
- The Green Business Grant will offer up to 50% of the cost of any works, to the maximum value of £5,000.
- Town Centre Health – footfall was lower in September 23 compared to the previous year. The reasons were not clear but it was hoped these would pick up during the festive period.
- The team also continued to support job fares.
- The Building Grants Scheme was progressing well as was the cultural programme.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

44 **ACCESS TO INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC (01:20:00)**

The Chairman indicated that discussion with regard to the next item of business, required the PDG to pass the following resolution to exclude the press and public having reflected on Article 12 12.02 (d) (a presumption in favour of openness) of the Constitution. This decision may be required because consideration of this matter in public may disclose information falling within one of the descriptions of exempt information in Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972. The PDG would need to decide whether, in all circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption interest in disclosing the information, outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

RESOLVED: That, in accordance with Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the item 13, for the reason set out below:

Information under paragraph 3 (contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person including the authority holding that information).

(Proposed by the Chairman).

45 **2024/2025 FEES AND CHARGES (01:23:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting to Members the proposed Fees and Charges for 2024 / 2025.

The contents of the report were outlined and a summary provided of the proposed Fees and Charges for the following financial year. Following discussion and having returned to open session, the Economy Policy Development:

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the delegated inflationary increase of 6.7% on Fees and Charges for 2024 / 2025 be approved.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Reason for the decision

The current budget for the General Fund shows a potential deficit of £765k, with an increasing funding deficit projected in future years. Were Members to decide to reject any of the proposals, then additional savings of the same value would be required to deliver a balanced budget.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

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

The following items were identified by the Group for discussion at future meetings:

- J27 update, particularly in relation to the Destination Management Plan
- Opportunities to increase income through advertising on MDDC property

(The meeting ended at 7.24 pm)

CHAIRMAN