

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **ECONOMY POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 4 January 2024 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

J M Downes (Chairman)
G Cochran, M Farrell (Vice Chairman),
B Fish, M Fletcher, N Letch, R Roberts and
G Westcott

Also Present

Councillors

D Broom, E Buczkowski and J Buczkowski

Also Present

Officers

Richard Marsh (Director of Place), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Zoë Lentell (Economic Development Team Leader), Angie Howell (Democratic Services Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online

A Cuddy, S Keable and D Wulff

47 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr A Cuddy who was not able to attend the meeting in person but attended online.

48 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

49 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

No interests were declared under this item, however, Members were reminded of the need to make a declaration should it become relevant during the course of the meeting.

50 MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 16 November 2023, were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

51 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

52 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - DRAFT BUDGET UPDATE FOR 2024 / 2025 (00:04:00)

The Group received, and **NOTED**, a verbal update from the Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change regarding the 2024/2025 budget position. This was based on the Medium Term Financial Plan report presented to Cabinet in December and the latest position being presented to the Cabinet on 9th January 2024.

The following summary was provided:

- Savings totalling £1.68544m had been identified as part of the budget setting process during recent months. These had been listed under the RAG rating system so as to identify red, amber and green risks in terms of deliverability and impact on the service.
- It was confirmed that staff savings would only be taken if a post became vacant, redundancies would not be a factor as part of this budget.
- As a result of a great deal of hard work by both staff and Members there was now only a shortfall of £150k as compared to a shortfall in December 2023 of £418k.
- Some of this was due to government announcements in December regarding the local government financial settlement and Council Tax and Business Rate changes.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Possible income from battery boxes in the future.
- There was some flexibility with regard to purchasing energy in advance.
- Savings with regards to changes in the Leadership Team structure were reflected in the draft budget.
- It was hoped that there would be a new mechanism for local government funding following the General Election as the current system was viewed by many as 'broken'.
- Mid Devon was in a pool of local authorities for Business Rate purposes. This had benefits in terms of sharing risks and reducing our levy payment of any growth achieved.
- A full condition survey would be undertaken on all Mid Devon assets over the coming 12 months to assess their short term maintenance needs, longer term viability and options to improve carbon neutrality.

The Group wished to express its congratulations and thanks to all members of staff and Members of the Council who had played a part in helping to identify budget savings in order to reduce the shortfall for next year's budget.

53 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE (00:20:00)

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. This included the following:

Prosperity Funding:

- 9 applications had been received to the current round. A further 5 businesses had been invited to full application (from rounds 1 and 2) but had not yet submitted forms. The next round closed for applications at the end of January.
- The Funding Panel meet on 17 January to make grant award decisions and a decision summary will be shared with the PDG Members.
- The January 'Be Grant Ready' workshop had 13 places booked with 7 spaces remaining.

Field to Fork:

- The 'Meet the Producer' project was proving popular with good levels of engagement on social media. The project was approximately halfway through with another 6 producers to be featured. A more in depth update on this project would be presented to the next Committee meeting. This project was specifically supporting the Field to Fork elements of the Shared Prosperity Delivery Plan with targets for:
 - Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support, and
 - Number of people reached.
- The 'Meet the Producer' posts and reels had been published weekly on Facebook and Instagram throughout December and would be ongoing.
- Grants had been offered to Food and Drink Devon and Devon County Show for further support projects to Mid Devon producers. This included networking events, membership support schemes and subsidised trade stalls. This supported delivery of outputs for businesses receiving non-financial support and supporting enterprises to reach new markets.
- Through the Devon Agri-tech Alliance, as part of the Business Support project with Devon County Council, 4 specialised events for farm businesses were being organised, the first of which would focus on "Routes to Market" taking place on 22 February at Pipers Farm. The next two events were pencilled in for end of March/ early April looking at Diversification and the third event in November looking at Regenerative Farming. The fourth event would take place early 2025 with the topic to be confirmed.

Visitor Economy

- Project work continues on both the Walking Festival and Tiverton Swan Trail.
- The programme for the Walking Festival was being collated, with the initial content to be featured in a promotional campaign - "Escape to Mid Devon" - running later this month to encourage holiday bookings in Mid Devon.
- The swans were with the artists until the end of January, when they would return for an anti-graffiti lacquer coating before being ready for installation by the end of March. The Planning Application for the Swan Trail would go to Planning Committee in February.
- A more in depth update on both the Walking Festival and Swan Trail would be presented to the next Committee meeting.
- With regards to other Visitor Economy projects outside the SPF:
 - The Bradninch board was installed Friday 8 December opposite the SPAR, outside the Guildhall. Many thanks to the Town Council and residents of Bradninch for all their help with content and pictures.
 - Additional boards were installed in Crediton on Tuesday 28 November, one in St Saviours Way car park, one in Market Street car park and again, our thanks to the Town Council for working with us on this.
- Visit England was creating a portfolio of nationally supported, strategic and high-performing Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs).
- The team continued to engage with the Heart of the South West LEP and destination management colleagues across Devon on a potential Local Visitor Economy Partnership for Devon. The recent workshop in December looked at options for a framework for the new LVEP. The team fed back the importance of:
 - Communication and ensuring that district councils had a clear voice on the LVEP.
 - Recognition of the different USPs and offer that parts of the county provide, ensuring that countryside, city and moors were promoted as well as the coast.
 - The need for the LVEP to encourage skills support both with regards to best practice updates for our businesses but also to liaise with and advocate for sectoral qualifications locally to support employment needs.
 - Fair membership models to ensure that micro tourism businesses had equal access to sectoral information and advice in the same way as the larger tourism businesses.
- Tomorrow's Tourism were working on behalf of the LEP to assemble the bid to Visit England. They were collating the feedback from the workshop and the team expect to receive an update on this soon.

Business Innovation

- Under the Business Innovation project, Petroc were hosting another business breakfast engagement event on 1 February and a business growth workshop at the end of January in their new Innovation Centre.

Looking Ahead

- The team were proceeding with Q4 delivery and preparing for the start of 2024/25 with the launch of the People and Skills projects.
- Mid Devon and other District Authorities across Devon were in conversation with Devon County over options for supporting an Enterprise and Skills Hub. This would directly support the Youth Skills and Supported Employment interventions in the team's Delivery Plan. Discussions were still underway and an outline of the confirmed proposal would be reported in March.
- With regards to the Green Skills intervention, a grant award had been offered to Apricot Centre, towards a Regenerative Agriculture Training, Skills and Employment Project. Due to the delivery timescales, this project would start in January 2024.
- The team were looking to host some business support surgeries in February and March. The February event would coincide with a consultation event at the Market Centre building looking at its potential use as a work hub. A survey was live and the team would present the findings of the study at the next PDG meeting.

Town Centre Health

- Quarter 4 shop surveys were undertaken in January each year. This will be reported to the March Committee meeting along with the latest footfall data.
- Sadly the team were losing their Project Support Officer the following day. The post would be re-advertised.

Consideration was given to the following:

- Businesses had to be officially registered as a business enterprise in order to qualify for funding consideration under the various agricultural schemes.
- It was confirmed that 'Levelling Up' funding in this area did not feature as part of the 'bottom line' on the budget, it was up to the Group to identify ways of using the funds.
- Businesses did not currently pay to advertise as part of the Field to Fork programme. This had originally been a way of helping businesses through Covid and as part of a recovery plan. This would be reviewed as part of the Destination and Culture Management Plan due to be undertaken during 2024.
- There were potential income opportunities for businesses to advertise their goods and services as part of the Walking Festival / campaign.

- Future presentations to the Group by businesses applying and being successful in receiving funding were encouraged.
- It was requested that future data in relation to some of the schemes and projects discussed this evening be presented more 'pictorially' going forwards rather than the Group just receiving a written report.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

54 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (00:40:00)

In addition to the items already listed the following was requested by the Group for either the next meeting or a future meeting:

- An update in relation to J28 as well as J27, to include the Culm Garden Village, the Cullompton Relief Road and the Cullompton Railway line.
- The Chairman's annual report. This would also be used as a wider agenda item at the first meeting in the new municipal year to highlight achievements during the last year, take stock of progress with regard to the Shared Prosperity Programme and also identify work programmes for the following year.
- An informal session of the Group (to which all Members be invited) to be arranged to discuss income generation.

(The meeting ended at 6.20 pm)

CHAIRMAN