

MINUTES of a MEETING of the ECONOMY & ASSETS POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held on 20 June 2024 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors J M Downes, M Farrell, G Cochran,
M Fletcher, N Letch and R Roberts

Also Present

Councillors D Broom, S Keable and F Letch

Also Present

Officers Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Richard Marsh (Director of Place & Economy), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Zoë Lentell (Economic Development Team Leader), Laura Woon (Democratic Services Manager) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, G Czapiewski and J Lock

Officers

Online S Walford

Also in

Attendance J Walker and J Yates from Petroc

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Cllr J Downes be elected as Chairman of the Economy & Assets Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2024/2025.

2 ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Cllr M Farrell be elected Vice Chairman of the Economy & Assets Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2024/2025.

3 **START TIME OF MEETINGS**

RESOLVED that the start time of meetings of the Economy & Assets Policy Development Group continue to be 5.30pm on Thursday evenings for the remainder of the municipal year.

4 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

5 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

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

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

No interests were declared under this item.

7 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 7 March 2024, were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

8 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

1. He thanked the Group for electing him as Chair for a further year.
2. He referred to the 'Flock that Rocks' swan sculptures and suggested that perhaps the plinths that they sat on could have been painted.
3. He hoped that going forwards, the Policy Development Group would be more policy orientated. He referred to the Car Parking Working Group which had been established by the Group and had been a 'trail blazer' in terms of community engagement and consultation prior to making its recommendations. It was confirmed by the Chair of the Car Parking Working Group that work was ongoing and they would next be meeting in July.

9 **PRESENTATION FROM PETROC ON THE BUSINESS INNOVATION CENTRE PROJECT (00:10:00)**

Representatives from Petroc were present to provide a presentation on the Business Innovation Centre Project.

This included the following summary information:

- The centre was called the 'Centre of Technology & Innovation Excellence' or 'COTIE' for short.
- Refurbished 7 rooms for business activity including, hot-desking, conferences/expos, creative spaces, meeting pod's.
- Created a new link bridge to creative spaces.
- Created a new and separate IT infrastructure.

- Purchased a wide range of equipment to support the engagement project.
- They wanted to work with businesses who had innovative new ideas, new products/service, wanted to be more proactive or increase revenue, wanted to create more jobs or safeguard ones at risk, share knowledge and participate in research and development.
- They had delivered 16 engagements or training sessions/events and much more was planned from September onwards including digital skills training for businesses, support for business startups, Expo's and events and opportunities for businesses to use creative spaces.
- A vast array of technology had been purchased to support the help offered to businesses including the latest 3D photography technology, the latest 360 degree filming equipment, the very latest in extended reality headsets. As well as this, they had also invested in 10 Dell laptops, 2 gaming spec PC's. 3 27" monitors, 15 Microsoft Office 365 licences, 2 x 75" iiyama smart screens and 1 meeting owl.
- Upcoming events included the 'Business Innovation Showcase' on 11 July which would run all day and allow interested parties to drop in at any point during the day to find out how the programme could support them. The day would feature a tour of the Innovation Hub, free learning workshops, technology demonstrations and a virtual reality experience.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Local businesses were actively marketed and Eventbrite used to market training courses.
- This was a project receiving funding specifically for businesses in Mid Devon and whilst this was the priority they were also reaching out to businesses in the wider community.
- They were working very closely with the Federation of Small Businesses.
- Different social media platforms were used to promote activities.
- They also had links with Exeter University who had also launched their own Incubator Hub.
- Despite what had been achieved so far the centre was still very much operating at an early stage of its development and much more was hoped for in the future.
- Voluntary groups could be helped, for example, the Scouts, if there was a business need.
- COTIE had a very good working relationship with the Economic Development Team. Helpful collaboration and referrals were working well.
- Since a key priority of the Group had been to support and encourage Incubator space start up activities, it was requested that it received a case study at a future meeting, particularly one that had been a start-up and which had progressed to be a success.
- It was confirmed that COTIE were focussing on certain core areas such as Agritech, Engineering, Digital and Food Manufacturing. However, support could be offered to other types of business, for example, a café, with issues such as website advice and financial support advice. Each business and the knowledge of those running the business was different, therefore a tailored approach was needed in each case.

10 DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2024-2028 (00:49:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Chief Executive, the Head of People, Performance and Waste and the Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager presenting the draft Corporate Plan for 2024-2028.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- The Corporate Plan had been developed over the past 6 months and had been presented to Cabinet on 4 June.
- It provided a summary of the Council's strategic objectives and ambitions and highlighted the key areas for each Policy Development Group.
- The name of the Corporate Plan was still to be decided and Cabinet may choose to leave it as the 'Corporate Plan 2024-2028'.
- All PDG's were being asked to provide feedback so that the new Corporate Plan was in the best state it could be before being approved by Full Council.
- Comments from Members could be forwarded to the Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager outside of this meeting.

The Group provided the following feedback:

- Under the Economy & Assets area, it would be good to have listed the number of current jobs in Mid Devon and how many businesses those jobs supported set against how many the Council would like to help the District achieve in the next 4 years. This could then be measured.
- The paragraphs in 'The background' section could be rearranged to so that the third paragraph become the first one and the current first one become the last one. The middle paragraph did not need to be so detailed.
- Under the 'Medium Term Financial Plan' section accountant 'speak' needed to be avoided so as to make the numbers referred to easier for non-accountants to understand.
- Under the 'Planning, Environment & Sustainability' area mention should be made that the District Council is a 'considerate' Planning Authority.
- Under 'Service Delivery & Continuous Improvement' it would be better not to refer to the 'right price' as this gave the wrong message.
- Under the number of town events supported it should say 'a minimum of three'.
- J27 was not mentioned under section 4.5 in the relevant table, should it be?
- It was hoped that the Performance Measures and Targets under the 'Economy & Assets' area would be more populated the next time the Group saw it.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the draft Corporate Plan be approved subject to consideration of the Group's feedback.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

Setting out the Council's aims and objectives through a Corporate Plan helped the Council demonstrate its performance in relation to Value for Money considerations.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

11 **PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q4 (01:02:00)**

The Group were presented with, and **NOTED**, summary information * reflecting performance in the Economy & Assets areas for quarter 4 2023/2024.

The following was highlighted on the Performance Dashboard:

- The data presented referred to the Economy PDG area for the last quarter of 2023/2024. This was before the creation of the newly titled PDG areas.
- The Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager listed the RAG ratings which were showing as either red or amber.
- Car parking income was slightly behind target, however, the new charges would not be applied until quarter 1 of 2024/2025.
- Pannier Market income was shown as amber and there were a couple of long term commercial voids
- Capital slippage was shown as red and was mainly to do with the delay of the Cullompton Relief Road.
- The Dashboards for quarter 1 in 2024/2025 would be updated once the new Corporate Plan had been approved.

Consideration was given to:

- What 'Outturn' actually meant? It was explained as a way of looking backwards to see how an area had performed.
- It was within the gift of the Group to ask officers why performance in relation to corporate buildings and commercial premises was under achieving.
- It was requested that the Group receive a list of commercial premises and where they were.
- Whilst there had not been any capital expenditure in relation to J28, a significant amount of officer time had been spent doing feasibility studies and trying to secure external funding for its progression, this was why costs were showing.

It was **AGREED** that a meeting be set up to allow information relating to income and expenditure in the Economy & Assets area to be relayed to the Group by the Accountants so as to improve their knowledge in this area.

Note: * Summary information previously circulated.

12 **SPF/REPF YEAR 2 OVERVIEW (AND Y3 DELIVERY PLAN) (01:19:00)**

The Group received a presentation, and **NOTED**, an update from the Economic Development Team Leader providing an overview of the Shared prosperity Fund (SPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Year 2 and the Year 3 Delivery Plan.

This included the following summary information:

Love Your Town Centre

'Love Your Town Centre' was a flexible funding mechanism offering small grants through a competitive bidding process with four strands aimed at improving the town centre and increasing the vibrancy and vitality of our three main markets towns: Crediton, Cullompton and Tiverton. This included:

- a) Shopfront Enhancement Schemes.
- b) Vibrant Town Centre Scheme.
- c) Vacant Shop and Business Growth Scheme (Year 2 onwards).
- d) Digital High Streets Scheme (Year 2 onwards).
- e) For year two, we also contributed towards the Cullompton Heritage Action Zone public realm enhancement project.

The Cullompton Scheme had funding from GED to support delivery of the HAZ shopfront scheme. The team intends to use the underspend returned to us towards a new shopfront scheme that aligns with the Tiverton and Crediton schemes and it had already received two enquiries.

Vibrant Town Centres

This had been a popular scheme and helped to support 68 events and activities in our town centres.

In addition to the events supported and grants offered outputs, the scheme also supported 10 volunteering opportunities.

The scheme continued this year with the first round already complete and more events and activities funded including the Tiverton Literary Festival, Crediton's Big Boniface Bash and an arty party in Cullompton amongst others. The next round was in the autumn, which would complete the programme for this year.

Across the LYTC scheme, through engagement with the team, we have achieved additional outputs of 15 businesses receiving non-financial support (including signposting, advice and guidance) and supported 12 businesses who were taking on empty units. 9 commercial properties were improved within year 2 and the remaining applicants are on schedule to complete their improvements this year.

This year, all four schemes would continue with open applications for shopfront, digital high street and business growth.

Field to Fork

This focused on promoting direct supply, 'buy local' campaigns and linking local food producers and businesses.

There are three key strands to this project:

- Buy Local Campaigns
- Networking Support
- Showcasing Events

The 'Meet the Producer' project supported 14 of our producers and their food retailers as presented at the last PDG. The Team would continue this project this year focusing on food tourism businesses.

Under networking support, the team funded free membership (for 12 months) for local food businesses with Food Drink Devon (FDD). FDD was a Community Interest Company, membership organisation was made up of hospitality, retail, food and drink producers and support businesses from the County. Their aim was to support and promote members and raise Devon's culinary profile as a whole.

Off the back of the Membership scheme, we also worked with FDD on 'Meet the Expert' networking events including an event in Westpoint towards the end of the financial year.

In addition to businesses supported, Field to Fork had also achieved a reach (which means engagement) of 39,898.

This year the team had an expression of interest for a grant to a local producer to host a Taste Mid Devon event. This was now in application stage and more information would be shared at the next PDG.

The team were continuing to work with Mid Devon Show this year to provide free space for Mid Devon producers attending for the first time. Six producers had already booked and a number of other businesses had expressed an interest.

At this year's show, the team would have a Taste Mid Devon tent bringing producers together. The team would also have a stand in the tent promoting the Farm Shop Trail and a special swan guest with them.

Visitor Economy

Visitor Economy focuses on linking to outputs around promoting Mid Devon as a tourism destination and supporting leisure and tourism businesses. There are three main themes being:

- Promoting Mid Devon
- Tourism Events
- Campaigns and Competitions

New for this year: Using REPF funding, the team also have a project to create some "welcome to Mid Devon" signage subject to owner consent at gateway locations.

Much of year two was spent on planning and preparing for the Swan Trail and Walking Festival.

The Search Engine Optimisation enhancement project took place early in year two making improvements to the visibility of the Visit Mid Devon website in results from online search engines. As a result, this has achieved an increased number of web searches for a place of 259,627 in year two.

The campaigns and competitions were run via the Visit Mid Devon Facebook page, promoting a number of our leisure and tourism businesses as well as Mid Devon as a destination.

In total, 47 businesses and organisations (not including duplicates across campaigns) were featured across different promotional activities.

Other Projects

These are mostly the projects the Team were not delivering directly themselves but were working in partnership with external organisations to deliver.

This included:

- Business Support
- People and Skills
- Business Growth and Innovation
- Flexible Workspace

People and Skills

The team awarded a grant to the Apricot Centre in January for provision of regenerative farming training to Mid Devon farmers. An update was expected from them about take-up and delivery at the end of this quarter.

New this year would be the introduction of an Employment and Skills Hub project coordinated by Devon County Council. Many of the Devon authorities had contributed SPF towards this service. This would involve an Advisor based in Mid Devon two days a week offering 1:1 advice, guidance and skills coordination to help economically inactive people and young people access employment.

Business Growth and Innovation

Incorporating grant funding to Petroc College towards the creation of a business innovation centre (COTIE @ Tiverton) and a programme of business innovation outreach activities as outlined in Petroc's presentation earlier this evening.

Flexible Workspace

There was an amount of REPF and SPF funding for the creation of flexible workspace in year 3 of the delivery programme. The team commissioned a feasibility study in year 2 looking at the Market Centre as a potential location and the study confirmed there was an appetite from the local business community – homeworkers and self-employed – for a site in the town centre. Year 3 would focus on the delivery of this project.

Prosperity Programme

The prosperity programme was the Council's main grants scheme to support businesses with projects that facilitate growth. This used the bulk of the REPF funding and contributions from SPF.

Over the first year of REPF: 14 businesses were offered grant funding, with one declining the grant offer (with a further two businesses offered funding from SPF at the tail end of Yr 1).

The Economic Development Team Leader was congratulated on her presentation and the successful projects which had been referred to.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The well deserved appreciation by the Group of the hard working Economic Development Team.
- A leaflet listing all available grants could be circulated.
- It was confirmed that there was no minimum grant request for the Shopfront Scheme, although the paperwork needed to be provided up front.
- The team were easily able to access advice from colleagues in Planning to assist with enquiries.
- With regard to the Shopfront Enhancement Scheme businesses were encouraged to come forward.
- On occasions the paperwork side of things was viewed as bureaucratic, however, it was explained that the Council needed to be compliant with procurement obligations. However, businesses having difficulties with the paperwork or procurement elements were encouraged to speak to the team directly.

13 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE (01:46:00)**

The Group received, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Place & Economy providing an update on activities carried out by the Growth, Economy and Delivery Team since the last committee meeting.

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

- There had been an increase year on year of vacancy rates, however, all three town centres had vacancy levels below the national average between quarters 3 and 4.
- The new Green Enterprise Grants Scheme launched for applications in April but was now closed. At the time of the report 14 businesses had requested the application, although one was ineligible as it was out-of-area.
- The bid for a Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) was successfully approved by Visit England. Devon County Council were acting as the accountable body for the LVEP and were in the process of setting up a steering group. It was likely it would take around 12 months for the LVEP to get up and running, therefore the Economic Development Team would continue to progress the review of the Destination Management Plan (DMP) with the intention of linking this into the LVEP's Destination Plan once published. As part of the DMP research, the team had commissioned a visitor survey which was being conducted over the May and Summer school holiday periods; the results of this would be fed back to Members later in the year.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The demise of the Tourist Information Centres several years ago and whether the District Council could do anything to help? It was explained that no funding was available at the moment but officers were in the process of commencing work on a Destination Management Plan and Members would have the opportunity to comment on this as it was developed.
- There was currently a lack of clarity as to what would happen once the SPF and REPF funding programmes have ended. Officers would continue to

pursue potential grant funding opportunities as, and when, they became available.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

14 **WORK PROGRAMMING FOR 2024 / 2025 (02:00:00)**

The Group had before it the draft work programme * for the Economy & Assets Policy Development Group.

Throughout the meeting various requests had been made for the Group to receive information or hold further discussion on the following areas:

- A better financial understanding of the Economy & Assets area.
- To receive information with regard to the commercial assets held by the Council, how much they were worth, where they were and what could be done with them.
- Regular and proactive discussion on Incubator Space for Business Start Ups, to include the plans for a Hub at the Pannier Market.
- Updates in relation to J27 and J28 when appropriate.
- Regular on-going updates in relation to the work of the Economic Development Team and associated activities.
- A presentation from a representative of 'Food & Drink Devon'.
- 'Start Up' case studies.

It was **AGREED** to add these areas into the work programme for 2024/2025.

Note: * Draft work programme previously circulated.

15 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING**

The items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting were **NOTED**. It was also requested that the following be on the agenda:

- Commercial Assets – what were they, how much were they worth and what could be done with them?
- An update from Petroc regarding the 'COTIE' project and the presentation of a 'Start Up' case study.

(The meeting ended at 7.32 pm)

CHAIRMAN