

MINUTES of a MEETING of the ECONOMY & ASSETS POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held on 28 November 2024 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors M Farrell (Vice-Chair), G Cochran, M Fletcher, B Holdman, L Knight, N Letch, R Roberts and A Stirling

Apology

Councillor J M Downes

Also Present

Councillor G Westcott

**Also Present
Officers**

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

**Councillors
Online**

E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski and S Keable

Officers Online Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager), Linda Perry (Economic Development Manager) and Laura Woon (Democratic Services Manager)

Also in

Attendance Rachel Phillips from the Apricot Centre

26 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr J Downes who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman.

Note: The meeting was chaired by Cllr M Farrell, the Vice Chair.

27 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No members of the public asked questions.

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

No interests were declared under this item.

29 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 19th September 2024, were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

30 **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair had no announcements to make.

31 **PRESENTATION FROM THE APRICOT CENTRE (00:05:00)**

Rachel Phillips from the Apricot Centre provided the Group with a presentation which included the following information:

- They were a bio-organic farm which as well as growing and selling produce offered an education service, training opportunities and a well-being service. Their aim was to work with as many farms across Devon as possible.
- They had applied for and been successful in obtaining, Shared Prosperity Funding from the Council and were thriving in all of their ventures.
- The farm spread across 200 acres.
- They offered different training opportunities, such as knowledge sharing workshops, with community focus being very much at the heart of what they did.
- Increasing biodiversity and reducing carbon impacts were key priorities.
- They worked a lot with new entrant farmers and provided free consultancy and mentoring services in such areas as farm design and farm book keeping.
- Some farmers needed the validation of a professional qualification and the Apricot Centre offered this. The centre offered a wide range of respected qualifications.
- They were trail blazers and grateful for the support from the District Council who in helping to provide the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) funding they needed were helping them to create rural skills for rural communities.
- Long term funding was needed however to facilitate the continuation of this good work.
- Soil testing was another area of focus trying to establish how soils capture carbon through soil symbiosis and the study of this in a laboratory.
- The Centre also offered clinical therapy in a 'non-clinical' setting to a range of age groups.

Consideration was given to:

- There were 22 core members of staff and the Centre currently had a £1.5m turnover figure.
- They would be able to continue without funding from the SPF as they had secured some funding for next year, however, they would not be able to offer as much education. They aimed to offer courses free of charge to farmers in

particular as it did not seem fair to set framers off with a huge training debt before they had even started their careers.

- The importance of children knowing where their food comes from.
- Wildlife tracking was also important, people and wildlife all being part of the same ecosystem.
- They had worked with primary schools to create poly tunnels and raised vegetable areas. It was important to get the whole community involved. Also, involvement at an early age was vital. The Centre worked with schools to ensure they fitted in with the school curriculum.

The Chair thanked the representatives from the Apricot Centre for their attendance and for providing an interesting presentation. The information was **NOTED**.

Note: Cllr A Stirling declared a personal interest (subsequent to the meeting) in that he had attended a course with the Apricot Centre prior to them being in receipt of any SPF funding via the Council. He had paid for the course himself several years ago.

32 **PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q2 (00:33:00)**

The Group were presented with, and **NOTED**, a slide * showing performance information in the Economy & Assets area under the General Fund.

Since the Dashboard was last presented to this meeting, work had been ongoing to create a glossary. This contained all the measures used as part of the Dashboards and provided a definition for each. The definitions aimed to provide a fuller understanding of what was being measured and how. This was available on the Council's website.

There was one red measure and that was Capital Slippage of Projects. There were 5 projects slipping either fully or partially into 2025/26 the largest of which was the Cullompton Relief Road but this had recently received full funding approval.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- What was being done to support struggling small businesses given the number of empty properties was shown as 224? It was explained that this would depend on which ones were owned by the Council and a more thorough analysis of the Business Rates data would be needed to fully answer that question where it was possible.
- The Tiverton Pannier Market Strategy would be reviewed in the near future and the Council would work closely with the traders in order to do this.
- It was hoped the new glossary which had been circulated through the Members Weekly Information Sheet and on the website would help Members better understand the Dashboards.
- There was a full expectation that developers would continue to financially contribute to the infrastructure needed to support the Culm Garden Village.
- There was no further news on Cullompton Railway Station at this stage other than to say that its delivery was vital to the successful outcome of the other projects taking place in Cullompton. Interventions should be seen as interdependent rather than as individual projects.

Note: * Slide previously circulated.

33 **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025/2026 (00:45:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151 Officer) presenting the options to update the 2025/2026 budget for consideration / approval.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- The report provided a 'refresh' of the service areas falling under the umbrella of this Policy Development Group and showed the movement to date in the process of trying to set the budget for 2025/2026 and beyond. The budget gap for 2025/26 was currently £397k. It was hoped that the Government funding settlement expected just before Christmas and finalisation of 'corporate budgets' would help to plug this gap.
- Appendix 1 listed the service areas falling under the remit of this Policy Development Group and the officer talked the Group through each line.
- A lot of work would be needed in respect of the funding announcements expected just before Christmas and to finalise business rates in the final week before the budget was approved for next year.
- It was hoped there would be good news regarding Council Tax and Business Rates, however, the rise in National Insurance would negatively affect the Council's finances if not fully offset as Government have indicated.
- It would be a while before the full effect of the housing rents error was known on the Council's finances.
- The Group was reminded that there was still a significant gap predicted for future years.
- Membership of the Capital Strategy Asset Group was clarified.
- A report going to Cabinet in December 2024 would present the very latest position ahead of Council needing to agree a budget in February 2025.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

34 **SHARED PROSPERITY FUND: YEAR 4 OUTLINE DELIVERY PLAN (2025/26) (01:17:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report from the Director of Place and Economy providing an Outline Delivery Plan for a potential extension to the Shared Prosperity Fund programme (2025/26).

The following was referred to in the report:

- Details regarding the potential extension for a further year were yet to be received. A final Delivery Plan would be presented to this Group once those details had been received and understood.
- The team were working on an initial assumption based on previous years.
- The recent and on-going Economic Development Strategy workshops would help to inform the Delivery Plan going forwards in terms of focus and direction.

Discussion took place with regard to whether there was an evaluation on the local nature and sustainability of supported projects. It was explained that this very much came into play under the Rural England Prosperity Fund, for example projects

needed to demonstrate that economic advantage to one project/business didn't disadvantage another one. They also needed to demonstrate that the project had no negative impact upon the environment.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

35 **SHARED PROSPERITY FUND YEAR 3 Q2 UPDATE (01:22:00)**

The Group received, and **NOTED**, a presentation from the Economic Development Team Leader providing an update on the Shared Prosperity Fund Year 3, Quarter 2 position.

The following summary was provided:

- Key activities under the 'Love Your Town Centre' project had been the Shopfront Enhancement Scheme and the Business Growth Fit-Out Schemes. Key objectives had been to improve commercial buildings, reduce vacant units, support businesses, arts, cultural and heritage events. Next steps included a continuation of shopfront match funded scheme and new schemes planned for 2025/26. Challenges included a low application rate and weather impacting event delivery.
- Field to Fork: Meet the Producer Campaign. Showcasing Events, including the Mid Devon Show 2024 and the Devon County Show 2024. Food and drink businesses supported were listed in the presentation.
- Visitor Economy: Promoting Mid Devon Tourism Events and Activities, including the Tiverton Swan Trail and the Mid Devon Walking Festival.
- Other Projects included People and Skills: Employment Skills Hub project with Devon County Council, Business Innovation Centre and Outreach Programme with Petroc College. Business Support through the Prosper Support Programme with Devon County Council. Further Business Support through Devon Agri-Tech Alliance.
- Much had been achieved in terms of Business Support and Outreach.
- Prosperity Programme: Grant scheme supporting applications under various themes.
- Work Hub Scheme: The Hubs supported were listed and the next steps were works to the Market Centre which would commence in December 2024 and advertising for 'Expressions of Interest' from prospective operators.
- Prosperity Grants: Prosperity Programme completed and ongoing monitoring underway. Higher interest in adopting new technologies and reaching new markets versus lower interest in job creation. Business support was being promoted to encourage more take-up.

Discussion took place regarding:

- It was not yet known which areas of Mid Devon would receive funding for particular projects. It was hoped that there would be a fair distribution across the district.
- More innovative ideas were needed to support town centre business premises.
- How footfall data was collected was explained. This took place through the use of a facilitator called 'Visitor Insights' which used geolocation data from

digital devices and was 97% accurate. This data was shared with Town Councils and other service areas within the Council.

- 80% of customers searched online for products first therefore businesses were strongly encouraged to create an online presence.
- The Prosper Programme provided advice and support and businesses were encouraged to tap into this.
- The appearance of some shop fronts in town centres was putting some people off from visiting. Tiverton in particular had a significant problem with absentee landlords so it was very difficult to seek engagement from them. The Shopfront Enhancement Scheme existed to help support the improvement of some shopfronts but this needed to be applied for and engagement with the landlord was vital.
- The Government had started to introduce high street rental auctions. The Council needed to understand what opportunities that might provide going forwards.

36 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE (02:05:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report from the Director of Place and Economy providing an update on activities carried out by the Growth, Economy and Delivery Team since the last Policy Development Group meeting.

The contents of the report were outlined.

Consideration was given to:

- A need to remind Ward Members about the support that Prosper offered and how to go about putting businesses in touch with the right people.
- The majority of the external works to the Market Walk property would commence next month.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

37 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:11:00)**

The items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting were **NOTED**.

A brief discussion took place regarding the current situation regarding Broadband provision in Mid Devon. It was requested that details regarding a sister scheme to 'Connecting Devon and Somerset' be circulated to all Members. This was in relation to boosting mobile phone coverage.

(The meeting ended at 7.44 pm)

CHAIR