

MINUTES of a MEETING of the ECONOMY & ASSETS POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held on 18 September 2025 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

G Cochran (Chair)
J Buczkowski, J Cairney, M Farrell (Vice-Chair), L Knight, R Roberts, A Stirling and M Stratton

Also Present

Officers

Paul Deal (Head of Finance, Property & Climate Resilience), Adrian Welsh (Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy and Delivery), Linda Perry (Economic Development Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online

E Buczkowski and S Keable

Officers Online

Laura Woon (Democratic Services Manager)

15 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

16 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public.

17 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

No interests were declared under this item.

18 MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 19th June 2025 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

19 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair had the following announcements to make:

1. He informed the Group that the November meeting would be brought forward a week to allow for a Car Parking report to be brought before them and to allow any recommendations to be made to meet the Cabinet timescales for its December meeting. The meeting would therefore now take place on Thursday 20th November and not 27th November at 5.30pm.
2. The Chair stated that the Director of Place & Economy would be leaving the authority next month. He thanked him for all the help and support he had given the Policy Development Group and him personally during his time with Mid Devon District Council. He further stated that he would be sorely missed and that whoever he would be working with him in the future would be receiving someone who was extremely capable. His sentiments by were echoed by the rest of the Group.

20 **PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q1 (00:07:00)**

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

The Dashboard aimed to give an "at a glance" understanding of how services were performing in terms of performance, finance, and risk. Any measures that were also part of the Corporate Plan were listed in yellow text.

The indicators were presented with their current performance, the annual target, and a RAG rating to indicate whether the Council was on track to meet its targets.

Overall performance was presented in a pie chart and combined the RAG ratings from both the performance and finance measures.

For the measures showing as Amber or Red:

- Pannier Market occupancy rate (Amber) - was slightly behind target at 82%. This was broken down by the day of the week, occupancy was Tuesday (75%); Friday (85%); Saturday (86%)
- Pannier Market Income – Projected Outturn (Red). Income was lower than forecasted and had been marked as Red since the variation was greater than 10%.
- Capital Slippage % of projects (Red) - 2 out of 16 projects had slipped, these were the Building Management System at Phoenix House (currently being scoped) and the Cullompton Relief Road which was now well underway after securing the funding.

Discussion took place regarding:

- What steps were being taken to increase the occupancy rate at the Tiverton Pannier Market? It was reported that more recent data showed an improvement in this area. It was hoped that a report could be brought to this Group in the future to help shape a strategy for the Pannier Market moving forwards.
- Had funding been confirmed for the Cullompton Railway Station, if so, how much and when would it be received? The officer explained that the funding

had been confirmed but exactly how much had still not been announced by the Treasury. A figure in the region of £44m for both the Wellington and Cullompton Stations had been mentioned in the past but this had not been confirmed, however the final business case had been supported. Members requested to be informed as soon as more information became available.

- A request for a detailed Car Parking report to the next meeting including all relevant financial information.

21 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (00:17:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting the updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) which covered the period 2026/27 to 2028/29 and which discussed initial options for cost pressures/savings or income related to the services covered by the Policy Development Group.

A summary of the report and the relevant factors was provided as follows:

- The report was a little different to that provided in previous years. This was due to the raft of changes expected from 2026/27 and the longer term restrictions placed upon the Council by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The report didn't give a forecast shortfall to be addressed. Instead it highlighted the unprecedented level of uncertainty faced by all councils in respect of funding from 2026/27 onwards and estimated a range that the shortfall could fall within.
- The Chancellor's Autumn Budget would not be available until the end of November 2025. This would have a knock on effect of delaying the detail at individual local authority level. The uncertainty regarding future funding could not be overstated.
- Over the summer officers had identified a range of budget options to address the budget shortfall, using the Red, Amber and Green (RAG) assessment, which were being presented to the relevant Policy Development Groups for discussion, with the recommendation to support the Green and Amber options.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The majority of the cost pressures listed were outside of the Council's control.
- The possible reasons why this Council had been targeted as part of a minority group of around 50 authorities that would be one of the biggest losers based on the Government's initial draft calculations on funding. It was suggested that a possible reason could be that the Council had performed so well with Business Rates.
- Whether it was possible for officers to take a proactive and flexible approach to lease additional space within Phoenix House in order to maximise opportunities for income? It was explained that with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), the Council's options were restricted in terms of leasing out available space to new tenants until more was known about how the building was to be used in the future following LGR.
- The implications of significant decreases in funding on the Economic Development Team.

- Dialogue had been undertaken with Town and Parish Council's regarding the transfer of assets but there had not been much progress. This explained why the draft budget was showing a cost pressure of £30k in this area as those savings had not materialised.
- It was highly likely that Reserves would need to be used to fill the budget gap this year.
- Consideration needed to be given to better use of the car park at Lords Meadow Leisure Centre in Crediton in order to alleviate a need for local business to park in that area and achieve increased income for the Council. It was **AGREED** that this would be taken back to the Car Parking Working Group for them to explore further.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

- a) The updated MTFP position be **NOTED**.
- b) The Budget Proposals as set out in Appendices 2 and 3 be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr M Farrell and seconded by Cllr J Cairney)

Reason for the decision

By undertaking regular reviews of the MTFP the Council could ensure that its Corporate Plan priorities were affordable. The implications of the budget gap were set out within the paper. Many areas required greater clarity, particularly around national funding and possible changes to Government Policy. Therefore a number of key assumptions underpinned the reported position, which would be refined as greater clarity was received through the budget setting process.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

22 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM UPDATE (00:51:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Place & Economy updating Members of projects and activities undertaken by the Growth, Economy and Delivery Team during the last couple of months.

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

- The delivery of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund funded projects for 2025/2026 was a priority for the team with all funds needing to have been spent by the end of the financial year.
- The Council had entered into an agreement with Devon County Council to deliver three revenue projects as part of the SPF programme. These projects related to Employment Skills, Business Support (Prosper) and Agricultural Support.
- Under the banner of 'Prosper' there had been an AI (Artificial Intelligence) conference that day in Cullompton. This had been well received.
- Many grant schemes were underway and would be reported on at the next meeting.
- A Business Refresh Grant Scheme had also been recently launched and promoted through to Town and Parish Councils, stakeholder groups via social media. This was paying off as there had been a good deal of interest.

- 'Visit Mid Devon' continued to be supported by the team, as did the 'Love Your Market Campaign'.
- The Economic Development Strategy workshops had now been completed as had the business survey. The team were now awaiting the Growth Plan and South West Government Strategy, all of which would influence the final Mid Devon Economic Strategy.

Discussion took place regarding:

- It was confirmed that the Business Refresh Grant was only open to businesses at this stage.
- The methodology used to assess town centre vacancy rates as Devon County Council's methods provided different data.
- Absent landlords were a significant problem as well as complications regarding other permissions such as the heritage status of some buildings.
- Infrastructure proposals for Cullompton would help.
- Working in partnership was key.
- The changing nature of retail habits.
- Exit interviews were difficult as landlords often just disappeared.
- Lack of footfall was the main reason why traders left. Encouraging people into town centres was vital and events such as festivals were helpful in doing this.
- Also helpful were 'facelifts' to shop fronts and some grant funding was available to support this.
- Many of these problems being experienced nationally.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

23 **CULLOMPTON RAILWAY STATION - VERBAL UPDATE (01:16:00)**

The Strategic Manager for Growth, Economy & Delivery provided a presentation in relation to the Cullompton Railway Station which included the following information:

- The background and history of the Cullompton Railway and the proposals to get to this point.
- Proposals to reinstate the Cullompton and Wellington Stations had come about since they were the largest settlements between Exeter and Taunton.
- Both towns faced similar issues, for example, a lack of post 16 education.
- There had been no specific mention of the scheme in the June 2025 Comprehensive Spending Review which had caused some concern, however, the Government had reaffirmed its support since then.
- The location of the Cullompton Station and the 3 options considered in terms of routes were described.
- Grand Western Railway (GWR) had been extremely helpful.
- The Cullompton platform would accommodate 5 cars and would be unmanned.
- The current predicted timeline for the opening of the station was May 2028.
- Planning permission had been received and at the tender stage more information would become available regarding funding.

Consideration was given to:

- Car parking provision at the station was still be considered.
- The breaking of previous promises to the residents of Cullompton and until there was 'a spade in the ground' celebrations would be reserved.
- Network Rail would need to ensure accessibility was paramount. This needed to be part of a bigger conversation about improving accessibility within the town and as part of all future development proposals.

24 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:38:00)

The items listed in the Work Programme for the next meeting were **NOTED**.

In addition to this, the following was requested to be on the agenda for a future meeting of the Group:

- Car Parking Working Group Report (with a request that it include consideration of the car parking provision at Lords Meadow Leisure Centre and the opportunities for increased income to the Council) to be presented to the next meeting.
- An update on development at Junction 27.
- Information relating to a potential merger between Exeter College and Petroc – would Members be briefed or part of the discussion at all?
- A report on the Pannier Market, Tiverton.

(The meeting ended at 7.11 pm)

CHAIR