

Meeting on 20 August 2020

Agenda Item No 8

Questions by Members to Full Council under Procedure rule 9.2

Question 1: Procedure Rule 9.2 to Portfolio Holder for Economy & Assets from Councillor Mike Allen

During the last 6 months how has the Council supported the creative Industries as defined by the Local Government Association in their latest recommendations?

Answer:

The Council undertakes a range of activities designed to support businesses in the District. In addition to the Council's own Art Gallery and Theatre, those activities that are particularly relevant to creative industries include;

- Business support activity including through the Council's own funded programmes aimed at bolstering digital skills as well as referrals to the Heart of the South West Growth Hub
- Supporting the provision of workspace including at Exeter Science Park and Propeller in Exmouth -such initiatives underpin the gradual rise in digital employment seen in East Devon.
- Lobbying for and working with providers to improve the provision of high speed broadband
- Ensuring access to skills and training provision including in relation to the South West Institute of Technology
- Deployment of Covid-19 related business grants
- Supporting cultural festivals in the District - most recently the Sidmouth Folk Festival through the Discretionary Grant Scheme
- Ensuring that the creative economy is promoted through our regeneration projects – most notably at Queen's Drive Space through outdoor theatre and cinema events

Since lockdown EDDC has continued to support and develop a reimagined cultural offer as part of its wider recovery planning work. All the cultural teams we run have continued to operate despite the lockdown restrictions put in place and provide a wide range of activities and events using the digital platform to reach out to all our communities. These included:

- Moving our outdoor events activities onto a digital platform with the creation of a wide range of activities to connect with nature and learn about wildlife in your own garden or in your own home, these received a huge amount of interest.
- The THG team developed a series of on line activities and workshops under the "nature shorts" brand working in collaboration with the Countryside team and East Devon AONB Partnership to enable families to stay creative and engaged with the visual arts whilst in lockdown.

However since the easing of restrictions all the Council's Cultural teams have been working hard to reset their work programmes and develop a re-inspired programme of projects, events and activities that can help stimulate our recovery work and help heal the impacts from the virus within all our communities. Their recovery plans going forward include:

- For those audiences who are staying at home, THG and the Countryside team has launched its *Recovery Roadshow*, with its plans to take nature and culture out to our local communities, rural and urban. A new mobile **Creative Cabin** was launched 10th August and is hitting the streets with a dynamic programme of art activities, projects, talks on climate change, performances and workshops, to support health, wellbeing and respond to our local environment.

- THG is currently working with Exmouth TC and the local community to redesign the Abode of Love public realm area as a focus for cultural regeneration within the town working with Exmouth's creative arts community to reimagine this neglected public space as a place for public art commissions, making it a visually attractive meeting place and raising crucial questions about the impacts of climate change. Phase 1 has just started by selecting and working with 50 local creative and visual artists to start the public art makeover.
- THG has now reopened its doors to the public from 11th July with its acclaimed exhibition: **ARTIST ROOMS: Sir Richard Long's *Being in the Moment***. This ambitious exhibition examines our relationship with the natural world, is kick-starting East Devon District Council's programme of cultural recovery.
- To ensure the safety of all visitors and staff, THG has reconfigured the visitor experience in the galleries in line with latest government guidelines and all visits are now bookable on line providing bespoke guided tours on a bookable 3 day a week basis Thursday to Saturday, 10am to 5pm. Individuals and households of up to 4 people will be able to book a guided tour of the current exhibition (up to 45 minutes) on the THG's website or by calling the gallery. 6 tours will take place each day.
- Manor Pavilion theatre has already carried out with EDDC's Health & Safety Officer a risk assessment of venue to ensure it will be fully COVID19 compliant on reopening, works are due to start this month to ensure all appropriate measures are taken to protect audiences, performers and staff.
- Manor Pavilion theatre has started to put together a programme that considers suitable performances that will meet the social distancing requirements on stage e.g. comedy nights and critically acclaimed shows such as 'The Audience', 'One Man, Two Guvnors' etc.

The role of the cultural sector in helping communities and associated creative industries to recover from the impacts of the virus is well understood and EDDC's cultural teams are actively engaged in putting together an exciting, reimagined and district wide programme that draws on the collaboration of the THG team, Countryside team, East Devon & Blackdown Hills AONB Partnerships and the Manor Pavilion theatre working with local arts and theatrical organisations as well as national bodies such as the Tate.

Question 2: Procedure Rule 9.2 to Portfolio Holder for Finance from Councillor Mike Allen

By sector how much has the Council paid out in Business grants and rates reductions over the last 6 months?

Answer:

We are unable to provide the breakdown of business grants or rate reductions by Sectors (using Nomis standards classifications as subsequently clarified by Cllr Mike Allen) as neither the business rates data nor the grant data is held using these classifications. This would be a manual exercise and with nearly 4000 grants made it would be extremely resource-intensive to execute this.

The amount of funding that has been given under the three grant schemes is broken down as follows:

	Grant claims approved	Total grant paid
Scheme 1 (Small Business Rate Relief)	2,730	£27,300,000
Scheme 2A & 2B (Retail, Hospitality & Leisure)	<u>916</u>	<u>£15,190,000</u>
Total in Scheme 1 & 2	3,646	£42,490,000
Scheme 3 (Discretionary Grants)	<u>234</u>	<u>£2,310,000</u>
Total grants	3,880	£44,800,000

Rate Reductions:

Retail, Leisure & Hospitality Rate Relief Scheme (100% support)	1,141	£18,661,705.81
Nursery Discount Relief	22	£125,978.97

As per the grants we are unable to provide this information broken down by Sector using the Nomis Standards Classification as business rates data is not held using these standards.

Question 3: Procedure Rule 9.2 to Portfolio Holder for Finance from Councillor Mike Allen

What has the financial cost of poverty relief been to the Council over the last 6 months?

Answer:

We have financially supported residents with the following financial support:

- 541 additional new claims now in receipt of Council Tax Reduction which has seen our scheme costs increase by £483,574. We now have 7,767 households claiming Council Tax Reduction compared to 7,226 on 1st April 2020
- Supported 88 cases receiving £18,754 in financial support under the Covid-19 financial hardship scheme
- Awarded 113 council tax payers additional support with their council tax under the Exceptional Hardship Scheme (part of our Council Tax Reduction Scheme)
- Awarded 187 discretionary housing payments total value of £86,344.
- 18 community, voluntary and charitable groups received funding totalling £29,487 from the Coronavirus Community Food Fund (fund set up by EDDC)
- Sourced and delivered 169 emergency food parcels to residents.

The number of people now claiming Universal Credit has increased from 3,978 (March 2020) to 8,555 (July 2020).

We have also experienced a drop in our council tax collection levels from 39.98% (31 July 2019) compared to 38.05% (July 2020) which equates to a reduction in council tax income of £1,113,396.

Question 4: Procedure Rule 9.2 to Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery from Councillor Mike Allen

What preparations have been made for further waves of Corona virus pandemic in East Devon?

Answer:

Taking into consideration national guidance we are alert to the prospect of a second wave of infections and/or localised outbreaks requiring interventions.

Our Emergency Planning and Business Continuity Plans have been severely tested during the pandemic, they proved useful, effective and comprehensive, and have been refreshed and updated following our experiences. They are ready to be re-mobilised should the need arise.

We have reviewed and documented our Response to the pandemic and have a comprehensive Recovery Plan and Issues Log, which is monitored weekly by Strategic Management Team. Alongside my Cabinet colleagues, I continue to work closely with the Strategic Management Team as we transition to the 'new normal'.

Individual Services have Response & Recovery actions that have been tested and proven to have worked well. These will be re-activated if necessary, including re-establishing our Community Support Hub, Home Safeguard out of hours support, links with community and voluntary groups etc. There is still some funding for community food groups available from our allocation, with £17,547 unspent. Our WorkSmart processes have enabled a relatively seamless transition to home working for many of our staff, and our offices and depots have been made Covid secure, so we are prepared for further service disruption should a second wave of infection impact.

We continue to work closely with DCC and the Director of Public Health as part of Team Devon, and have access to intelligence on the infection rates nationally regionally and locally. It is this data that will likely trigger localised infection control procedures, and cause us to activate a Response to any new restrictions imposed.

The Outbreak Management Plan produced by DCC is in place with governance processes that trigger our involvement as required. DCC publish a helpful Covid-19 dashboard that will show when local infection control measures are necessary, and this data can be accessed via the link below:

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/coronavirus-advice-in-devon/coronavirus-data/>

I am confident that the organisation is in a strong position to respond quickly, effectively and support our communities should a second wave of Covid-19 infections occur.

Question 5: Procedure Rule 9.2 to the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development from Councillor Susie Bond

Following the Strategic Planning Committee meeting of 23 July and the decision over GESP, what is the administration's Plan B?

Answer:

I wouldn't call the next steps of this administration a plan B, as GESP wasn't this administration's plan in the first place. It is a mixture of two former administrations' work with no true and genuine input from the Strategic Planning Committee other than when it was voted down at the issues consultation with a Conservative Councillor at the time stating, "This is not fit for purpose".

Through reviewing the GESP document at the Strategic Planning Committee, it was the decision of the committee to withdraw from GESP and it is this administrations plan to fulfil the wish of the Committee.

As per the amendment, we will be pushing ahead with a revised Local Plan that will be ambitious in design and deliver in the key areas which Members felt the GESP policies didn't. We will have full Member engagement throughout the process, the policies will be future proof and will tackle key areas such as climate change and a post-COVID East Devon vision. We will bolster the transport policies as this was a key area of concern during the debate and we will push for much needed strategic infrastructure and its delivery at every turn.

We still hope to continue working with and in partnership with our neighbouring authorities. We simply wish to do this from outside the GESP framework that both ourselves and partners in Mid Devon have stated lacks vision, substance, council aspirations and full democratic representation.

Question 6: Procedure Rule 9.2 to the Chair of the Council from Councillor Peter Faithful

Will this council investigate the validity of the approval of planning application 19/2832/MFUL for a solar farm on land south of Rockbeare Hill? The reasons I suggest are that it was presented with false or misleading information; it was contrary to various policies and strategies of the National Planning

Policy Framework and the East Devon Local Plan; it is part of a long series of actions contrary to the Wildlife and Countryside Act; the decision was made by councillors, some of whom appear to have failed to declare a personal or pecuniary interest

Answer:

The question raises a number of different issues. Firstly, in relation to the '*false or misleading information*', if the Monitoring Officer is provided with the detail about what is said to be false or misleading then this will be looked into. Aside from this the Planning Committee considered the matter and approved the permission with the decision issued on 30th July. It would not therefore be appropriate for a review of the merits of the decision and anyone aggrieved by the decision is still within time to pursue a legal challenge if it is felt that the Council has not acted appropriately.

It is not clear what is meant by '*actions contrary to the Wildlife & Countryside Act*' but that Act makes, amongst other provisions, certain actions in relation to wildlife a criminal offence – these would be a matter for the Police to deal with.

Finally, in relation to interests. The Localism Act 2011 makes it clear that any breach of the code of conduct for failing to declare interests does not invalidate a particular decision. The Act also makes it clear that a failure to comply with a code of conduct should only be dealt with through arrangements put in place under the specific requirements of the Localism Act. The Council has put in place arrangements for dealing with alleged breaches of the code of conduct and the Monitoring Officer will happily provide further assistance if required.