

## **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 25 NOVEMBER 2020**

### **LEADER'S REPORT**

In the middle of October two of our staff tested positive for Covid 19. This resulted in several staff having to self-isolate for 14 days. It impacted our services; primarily in Waste and Recycling and in Customer Services. It resulted in missing a small number of waste and recycling rounds and we posted messages on our web site and social media to tell people the areas of the district affected. Not everyone is on the internet so if it happens again please be aware that we will try to return and do their collection within two days. If we haven't managed to do so within that time please inform anyone in your ward who may ask to take the bins back in again and put them out when the next collection is due.

In relation to Customer Services, the reduced number of available staff meant that trying to cover the phones and keep staff on reception had a knock on effect on the number of calls that the team were able to take. As a consequence, we temporarily closed the reception desks to visiting members of the public so that we could put more resource into answering the calls. This applied to the desks at Ilfracombe, Barnstaple and South Molton. It was planned to reopen them at the beginning of November but this has been put on hold because of the lockdown. Recently we have had more cases of Covid 19 but so far we are managing to cope well under the circumstances.

As you are aware we were expecting to have a meeting of the South West Councils to discuss going into Tier 2 or Tier 3 because of the Covid 19 pandemic. However, the government did a U turn as the infection rate increased significantly nation-wide and brought in a lockdown until at least December 2<sup>nd</sup>. Staff who are able to do so are now working from home and a small number are now shielding. Although this time the conditions of the lockdown are not as severe as in the first one it does impact on many of our businesses. The economic regeneration team had produced an advert with Seth Conway which was to be shown, for example, on Sky TV etc. encouraging people to use the shops in our High Streets leading up to Christmas and featuring traders from Ilfracombe, Barnstaple and South Molton. We had to pull that and the economic team along with our comms changed the emphasis to encourage shopping locally online, using click and collect services and in suggesting to residents that they may wish to buy vouchers from our local businesses as Christmas presents e.g. for beauty salons. Obviously we want people shopping safely in those shops that are eligible to remain open. This is all part of the Live Love Local campaign as we hope North Devon's town centre businesses are able to return to the high street once lockdown is over. In addition we took the decision to carry on charging for our car parks because we rely heavily on the income but from 16.00 until 18.00 each day we are allowing free parking in selected car parks. Hopefully that will encourage people to use the click and collect service.

We have been working with Team Devon and the South West Councils to encourage the government to change the national system of Track and Trace to a local one. The national system hasn't been that successful with only about 60% of those who have been in contact with someone who has Covid being spoken too and asked to self-isolate.

We have been helping to co-ordinate a range of services for those in need by working alongside organisations such as One Northern Devon and the town and parish councils. Unlike last time, the government is not handing out food parcels to the clinically vulnerable as the emphasis this time is on self-sufficiency. So we have been working to coordinate volunteers to help with grocery orders and deliveries, collection and delivery of medication, transport to medical and hospital appointments (using a local taxi firm) and financial support for those in serious hardship. We provided an online form at [my.northdevon.gov.uk/service/Request\\_for\\_assistance](https://my.northdevon.gov.uk/service/Request_for_assistance) and our phone line at 01271 388280 for those who have not been able to get support from family or volunteers.

Local restriction support grants have been made available for businesses required to close in England. This has amounted to eligible properties with a rateable value of £15k or under, being given grants of £1,334 per month, those whose rateable value of between £15k-£51k receive grants of £2,000 per month and those with a rateable value of £51k or over receive grants of £3,000 per month. This has meant more work for our staff checking and getting these payments distributed. In addition £1.1bn is being given to Local Authorities, distributed on the basis of £20 per head, for one-off payments to enable Councils to support businesses more broadly until the end of next year. We have made the decision not to pay it all out immediately but to keep some for helping businesses during 2021. We know that our leisure and hospitality industries and some of our self-employed are being particularly badly hit by the Covid 19 restrictions and will need support for some time.

A lot of publicity has been in media recently about the provision of food for children of needy families. Several local businesses and individuals volunteered and stepped up to help during half term. The number of families on universal credit in North Devon more than doubled from March to September and unfortunately the situation is likely to get worse because more people are likely to become unemployed as winter approaches although the extension of the furlough scheme will help. To assist those who are struggling NDC has provided a Local Hardship Fund in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with financial support from Devon County Council. This emergency fund has been used to give money to schools who have then identified and provided direct help to families and children most at need. Financial support has been given to the North Devon Food Bank and other groups working with and supporting our local communities and we still have more money available for this purpose. It has just been announced that the government is going to give upper tier local authorities finance to enable those eligible for free school meals to receive meals for the Christmas holidays.

As Members are aware the Council set up a fund to provide financial support to households who were victims of the flash floods on 17 August. This was a one off fund, brought into effect largely due to the unprecedented circumstances presented in 2020, and based upon pledges from individual Councillor's grant allocations. Flood funding was made available only to those impacted by the floods on 17th August 2020 who didn't have any home insurance to help with replacing damaged goods etc.

Ken Miles, Malcolm Prowse and I have continued to meet with Torridge's equivalents and we are working together on many issues which affect Northern Devon such as the development of tourism and the appointment of a joint climate change officer. I am pleased that Torridge and North Devon responded together to the government's white paper on planning. Thank you to all who participated in the special S & R meeting to answer the specific questions in the consultation and with the assistance of the officers helped to answer each question in detail. We know that we have to have some more homes but one of the real problems is affordability for local people. In addition Ken and I had meetings with the District Council Network, the HotSW and Team Devon and they all sent in a detailed response to the consultation.

It is a particularly busy time for our service heads as they make plans for the next financial year. We are hoping to include more member input as it is important to ensure that our corporate priorities are fully incorporated in what we are planning e.g. concerning climate change.

NDC is gaining a national reputation for some of the excellent work it is doing as a local government authority. The latest work to gain national recognition resulted in NDC being a finalist in two categories for the prestigious Local Government Chronicle Awards Ceremony 2020. Over 1500 local government professionals attended and it made me very proud as Leader to also attend virtually and hear our authority being named and praised. You may remember the problem many councils had this summer with tons of litter being dumped by visitors particularly on beaches and beauty spots. NDC's Environmental Wardens Ray Jones and Alan Kyle wanted to prevent this in our area and together with our Communications Team came up with #ClearMessages. The idea was to raise the profile of these issues and crack down on anti-social behaviour through a programme of education, awareness and enforcement. This proved to be very effective.

In addition the Safe Sleep team became a finalist for the Local Government 'Team of the Year' award. They provided 1,857 nights of accommodation, over the winter, for more than 100 rough sleepers. Interdependent solutions were developed to serve these individuals and over a third of the group did not return to the streets. This is an example of NDC working together with both the statutory and voluntary sector organisations as the team included the Adult Social Services, Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services, the Police, and the Freedom Community Alliance (FCA).

Some more good news - Green flags will be flying with pride once again at Bicclescombe Park in Ilfracombe and Yeo Valley Community Woodland in Barnstaple, in a year when millions of people have seen the value of having great quality green

spaces on their doorstep. Both of the award winning green spaces are owned and managed by North Devon Council, with the help of active community groups including the Friends of Yeo Valley Woodland and the Bicclescombe Park User Group. 2020 is the 16th consecutive year that Bicclescombe Park has achieved Green Flag status, with Yeo Valley Woodland receiving the award for the 9th time in a row.

Also you are no doubt aware that we have adopted the following slogan on our emails – Distance socially, spend locally, enjoy safely as part of our Live Love Local campaign. You may have noticed that the comms team are coming out with graphic and colourful communications which deserve our praise. Other Districts and publications are now noticing it and commenting very favourably.

We live in difficult times but NDC is rising to the challenge but please keep safe.

David Worden

14<sup>th</sup> November 2020.