

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 13 JANUARY 2021

LEADER'S REPORT

May I first of all wish everyone a very happy 2021 and I trust that you had a good Christmas despite the restrictions. I hope that in the next few months that we will have turned the corner regarding Covid 19 and that as a council we can concentrate on moving forward rather than focusing primarily on maintaining services. We have just moved to lockdown and it will be some time before the pandemic comes to an end but vaccinations have begun. I was disappointed that we were the last area in Devon to start the vaccinations but now that the Oxford vaccine has been approved I am expecting the roll out to go ahead quite rapidly. It is important that we encourage as many as possible to take advantage of this in order that the infection rate and serious illness is drastically cut and less pressure put on the NHS. Hopefully then we will go down the Tiers rather than up and business can begin to recover. For many it has been a double whammy with us leaving the EU as well thus causing a lot of extra paperwork, red tape and a change of regulations.

As you are aware we have received a letter from Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government bringing us potentially good news. What he said was, "I am writing to inform you of the outcome of the Future High Streets Fund Competition (he then explained what is happening nationally)

I am therefore delighted to confirm your business case met the gateway criteria, and our assessment concluded it demonstrated overall good value for money. We would therefore like to make you an in-principle funding offer of £6,548,876 to invest in Barnstaple supporting you to deliver a much-needed boost to your high street at this challenging time. Now that you know the quantum of investment we are able to offer in principle, I would ask you to provide a final version of your plans. We have designed a streamlined process to enable plans to be updated in as quick and straightforward a way as possible and I can confirm £5,000 of financial support will be made available to support any work required. There will be no need to amend the business case documents – any update can be made via an online survey and pre-formulated spreadsheet. This will confirm how the new funding envelope will be allocated and any relevant updates that flow from it (for example, a revised BCR). My officials will be in touch next week with further details and guidance. My officials also stand ready to provide guidance at any time about how to complete the revisions and provide a sounding board for any proposed changes you may wish to make.

My Department is ready to move at speed to ensure projects can get underway quickly. In recognition that you will need to seek sign-off for your revised proposals we have set

a deadline of the end of February but my department will review updated proposals as soon as they come in. I therefore encourage you to submit these in January. For all approved revised proposals that we receive in January we plan to confirm funding before the end February, and for all approved revised proposals sent in February we plan to confirm funding before the end of March.”

So our economic development team will be working with government officials in the hope that we will be successful in moving forward to actually secure the funding. At the time of writing I am unsure whether we are expected as a council to make up the short fall in funding as our original bid was for around nine million but a big thank you to all those involved in the putting together our original submission. By the time of our Full Council meeting the situation will hopefully have become much clearer.

Since the last full council meeting we have received the provisional local government finance settlement regarding our funding for the next financial year. The core funding was in line with the current year 20-21 for next year 21-22; New Homes Bonus grant was about £500,000 less than we got for current year 20-21 but we were predicting in our financial plans that the reduction might be even more. The rural services grant was in line with this current year and it was also announced that we would receive some additional Covid-19 support grant for ongoing additional costs into 21-22 that will cover additional costs currently being seen for the early part of next financial year at least. We will also benefit from the extension of the current government scheme of reimbursement of 75% lost income because of coronavirus impact for the first 3 months of 2021-22 year.

The overall budget position, with increased costs and income reductions and taking into account the funding changes above, as I write this is showing an overall budget gap at moment of around £200,000 - £300,000 for 2021-22. This is much better than we anticipated a few months ago but of course some of the current pressures will continue into next year and provide some uncertainty and more importantly we do not know the level of funding for the following year 2022-23. Thanks to Jon Triggs and his team for the work they are doing to try and bridge this gap.

We are also busy distributing grants to businesses affected by the Tier 2 and now Tier 3 restrictions. We have had hundreds of applications but some businesses have so far yet to apply for this support. Despite our attempts to communicate that these are available some businesses may still not be aware of them and are currently missing out. If you know of a business that is likely to be eligible please refer them to the website <https://www.northdevon.gov.uk/coronavirus/business-support/business-grants/>

The MHCLG homelessness data shows that North Devon has had a very high rate of presentations during 2020 and this is significantly higher than most of the other local authorities in the County. The principal cause for this being people who have been asked to leave the household by family or friends. The current demand is on average

30-35 new cases per week and we are working hard to provide temporary accommodation. The refurbishment of Boyton House in Bear Street was progressing well, but some additional works has been identified. We were hoping that this will now be ready in February 2021 providing 7 single units of good quality accommodation. To help with winter and severe weather provision two rough sleeper pods have been installed in the car park of the Salvation Army's Hall in Barnstaple. An individual who has not engaged before is now using one, and a third pod is located at the Salvation Army in Ilfracombe. Other winter provision includes Beaufort Walk, two units in Bideford and we are discussing additional options with Encompass Southwest, who have increased their property portfolio and provision this year. A bid has been submitted seeking funding to assist in meeting the costs of severe weather provision; we have been advised that we may receive up to £50,000 from this application. A new scheme has been launched this month which has recently been featured on local radio and social media called Tap for North Devon; this provides four pay points in Barnstaple allowing visitors to give money to local homeless charities. People can present their payment or debit card at the screen for a contactless payment to be made of £3.00.

We have included a proposal within the service plan to provide a new home energy advisory service to around 200 households per year, delivered by 361 Energy. This will primarily aim to address fuel poverty and make our homelessness prevention interventions more successful whilst also reducing household carbon emissions.

There will be a housing equity review of Devon Home Choice, which was announced in December regarding a consultation period seeking feedback from statutory and voluntary agencies, those currently or have used DHC and the general public.

The aim of this is fair allocation of social housing, which is important as we support our communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and the financial impact this and will result in.

We will be seeking to provide emergency accommodation for care leavers, acting as the landlord in a pilot project (the first in Devon), addressing an area of weakness identified in the Ofsted report of DCC's Children's Services.

The Parish Forum in December proved to be a very worthwhile meeting. Despite its nearness to Christmas it was well attended and there has been some very positive feedback since from some of the parishes. Having a virtual meeting proved to be successful and a way forward.

Finally it is good to hear that we were recently awarded DCC's local authority of the year for Community Refugee Sponsorship. This relates to our work in Ilfracombe, Georgeham and Chulmleigh where families were housed under this scheme.

David Worden

4th January 2021.