

## **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 24 FEBRUARY 2021**

### **LEADER'S REPORT**

There is evidence that impact of Covid 19 is beginning to result in real challenges to our housing services with, for example, increases in the number of families presenting themselves as potentially homeless. It is a worrying trend and if the number of people unemployed increases when furlough ends, landlords could become nervous about prospective tenants with relatively low financial means. This could further increase demand for our services and limit our homelessness prevention opportunities. It isn't always easy to provide accommodation for a small minority who cause management challenges and exhibit extremely challenging behaviour. However, the rough sleeper pods are proving to be very successful in helping individuals transition to proper accommodation. Apart from ten days they have been fully occupied since November 2020. Also additional units of supported accommodation will be commissioned by the Freedom Centre before the end of March as a result of our successful Next Steps Funding bid.

One of our other responsibilities is that of providing Coronavirus enforcement. Through this we have issued a small number of fixed penalty notices and prohibition notices but most businesses appear to be keeping to the restrictions. Officers have been making proactive visits to supermarkets, showrooms etc and these have in general been welcomed by the businesses as it helps to ensure that they are Covid 19 restrictions compliant.

We are doing our best to support businesses and have been actively giving out grants to those which are eligible. I would like to thank those involved in ensuring that this is happening at pace. You will be aware that we paid out a massive £45million in the first lockdown to North Devon Businesses. During November and December we have paid out to date (as businesses still applying for this period) around a further £3.5million in business grants support. Since January 2021 and Lockdown 3.0 – we have as of 11th February paid out a further £5.5million in grants so far in the first 2 weeks of the scheme being live. We estimate that almost £20million of grants will be paid out for this latest lockdown period if all eligible businesses apply, so we still have potentially around £14million to administer.

As you know from the Councillor briefing the economic team have been concentrating on preparing the response to the Barnstaple Future High Street opportunity. I certainly hope that we will make the most of this chance to update the centre of Barnstaple, attract more visitors to the town and improve the public realm. If we complete this project it will be really good news for North Devon and everyone involved deserves to be thanked for their efforts. It is also good to see that despite the problems associated with coronavirus the new North Devon Leisure Centre is progressing quite well and is currently only a few days behind schedule.

The Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership's has developed a Covid 19 Economic Recovery Plan – 'Build Back Better'. As this has not come to any of our committees I have taken the liberty of giving some detail of my reaction to this report. My response to what was proposed at the recent meeting was that 'Build back better' is a good start in providing a framework for recovery but I wasn't prepared to sign it off as it requires more work to reflect the needs of North Devon. Unless it does this it will inevitably mean that North Devon will once again be left behind and not receive the support which we need and a great opportunity will be missed. There are some very positive parts including North Devon being included in the membership of a new coastal steering group linked to the Coastal Productivity Plan. However, there are gaps and lack of imagination in some areas.

For example, the elements which deliver clean and inclusive growth are limited in scope in the current document, though this maybe partly because of the limited detail that a vision document of this type contains. These are vital aspects of any recovery and there needs to be a greater emphasis on them. Nuclear and renewables are a significant element of the clean growth agenda within the plan but it would be good to see more innovation and aspiration, not only in sector growth but in system change, such as can be achieved through circulate economy and community wealth building approaches.

Inclusivity should address geographic as well as community interests and throughout the levelling up agenda is not clearly applied through the vision. Northern Devon is largely ignored and not captured adequately in terms of its needs and the opportunities that it provides. There is the need to maximise outcomes from limited resources but the government has clearly set its policy direction through the levelling up priority and this should apply within the region of the south west as well as nationally. For that purpose it is important that the Institute of Fiscal Studies map produced for Government use needs to be challenged as it shows Northern Devon as being well served with little problem of deprivation. In my opinion this is totally misleading and urgently needs to be rectified.

The LEP plan points out that the areas hardest hit by the pandemic are rural and coastal areas and that the same places will be the slowest to recover. Whilst appreciating the recognition for the particular challenges long experienced in rural and coastal areas, and made worse by C19, the responses detailed within the plan do not adequately respond to the challenge. In addition the defined programme strands needs to positively impact on rural, coastal and isolated areas and therefore address the most left-behind areas.

Reference in the plan is made in the text to the UNESCO geopark and World Heritage sites and that the National Parks are indicated in their accompanying map. However, it is important that the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere Reserve (land and marine), which extends to Lundy, is identified, particularly as the objective of the designation is to create a test bed area for innovation in natural capital and environmental sciences. The plan acknowledges the importance of natural capital in economic and environmental futures, however, there is a total lack of reference to the work being carried out by the North Devon Biosphere, particularly as the LEP is supporting the Smart Biosphere initiative. Part of the rationale for the Biosphere designation is to provide a test bed for trying out new approaches to supporting

natural environments in social and economic contexts so gives a huge opportunity, locally, regionally and nationally to accelerate work on natural capital and ecosystem services.

With regard to transport the North Devon Rail Line is well patronised and has a strong economic role in providing access to employment and education. This Line should be included as a priority for investment, building on replacement rolling stock, increased frequency of service during the peak and enhanced line speed.

The text of the Plan states; “The LEP has already established an Expert Panel to accelerate and mobilise its plans for ‘main-streaming’ inclusive growth both socially and spatially across all investments in our area. With its inaugural meeting in autumn 2020, the Panel is tasked with ensuring that all of our communities can benefit from and contribute to increased productivity, addressing inequalities of opportunity.” A laudable objective but North Devon Council was not made aware of the ‘Expert Panel’ or invited to make any contribution to it which is very disappointing.

The Plan includes the development of skills which needs to be at all levels and cover all sectors. We have made the point that linked to the investment in a new hospital there is a huge potential opportunity to transform the healthcare skills and increase sector in North Devon alongside the continued growth of the existing pharma cluster. In addition to our contribution to the HotSW and the LEP we continue to work closely with the other Devon District Councils and Devon County Council in what has become known as Team Devon. This year North Devon has the chair of the Devon District Forum which gives us the opportunity of formulating the agenda and attending meetings with the Devon M.P’s. The Economic Development team are, for example, working on pipeline projects and pursuing different funding streams for these key strategic projects with help from Devon County colleagues and the LEP.

These include : -

**Ilfacombe Stronger Town Bid** – The Stronger Towns Bid would incorporate a housing renewal funding/loan programme to help upgrade the poorest housing stock, invest in regeneration projects across the town centre and seafront and provide vital infrastructure upgrades to include flood defence works incorporating public realm enhancements.

**Barnstaple Flood Defence Programme** - A programme of flood defences along the rivers Taw and Yeo which will unlock a significant amount of brownfield land for housing and commercial development and protect existing housing, economic sites and the town centre as well as critical infrastructure and enable environmental enhancements through the removal of old defences.

**Mill Road Masterplan** - A masterplan is required to ensure a cohesive development across a number of NDC/DCC/privately owned sites. The master planning process will estimate the overall scale of new development (likely to be predominantly residential) to be facilitated by the proposed defence improvements and include opportunities for the comprehensive regeneration and to realise the opportunities of the flood defence programme.

**Taw Foot/Cycleway Bridge** - Provision of a pedestrian/cycle bridge across the river Taw linking the southern side of the river with the town centre. This will provide capacity that doesn't currently exist with the Longbridge.

**Food Technology Centre** - Providing a facility that can serve the food and drink sector in North Devon through knowledge transfer, equipment provision and workspace equipped for product development, testing and upscaling.

**Taw Link** – Testing the viability of a tram link between Barnstaple and Braunton to provide an additional transport link as well as a tourism attraction. Technical and feasibility studies together with engagement work needs to be carried out in phase 1.

**Barnstaple WiFi** - To provide free and reliable WiFi connectivity for residents and visitors when visiting Barnstaple Town Centre and the Pannier Market to enable more diverse use.

Finally I would like to say a special thanks to Jon Triggs and his team for the preparation of the budget. It hasn't been easy this year with so much uncertainty as a result of Covid and all the extra work which we have had in distributing funds to local businesses. Nevertheless the team have managed with the service heads to produce the balanced budget which we will discuss as part of the Full Council agenda.

David Worden

11<sup>th</sup> February 2021.