

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 7 APRIL 2021

LEADER'S REPORT

Since my last report in February I for one have been fortunate enough to have had my first Covid vaccination and I am sure that this is the case with many of our members too. I was most impressed with the organisation and efficiency of the team working at the Leisure Centre and would like to put on record my thanks to all who are involved. It would be good if there were centres in Ilfracombe, Lynton and South Molton as well but hopefully this will be arranged in the future. Fortunately at the time of writing we have not had any more coronavirus cases amongst the staff and we continue to take as many precautions as we can to ensure their safety. As you will be aware staff who are able to do so are still working from home. Although cases in our area are currently low it is important to encourage everyone to keep to the restrictions, social distancing etc especially as we expect an influx of tourists this year as we don't want a sudden spike in infections in North Devon. We are currently discussing with other Districts in Devon a road map out of the pandemic encouraging people to buy local and support our High Streets.

The work of our Housing Department isn't always brought to members' attention but the team has been doing a tremendous amount during the pandemic to help residents who are homeless or are facing housing issues. For example, during the twelve months from April 2020 to March 2021 over 1600 approaches were made to the Housing Department by residents in North Devon resulting in relief action being taken in around 650 cases. Around two thirds of these requests for help came from those who are single with the remainder being from couples or families with children. Over a third requested advice only, another third concerned prevention from being homeless with well over a quarter requiring relief actions. The main issues facing our housing team during the pandemic included an increase in the complexity of applicants, a lack of move on accommodation, high rental costs, increased landlord/agent requirements, change of use of rented properties, staff changes and the pause on evictions/warrants. During this time 157 individuals or families were placed in properties with North Devon Homes and 241 were given temporary accommodation. Although we have some properties there are issues including the lack of self-contained accommodation, the high use of spot purchased accommodation, the high support needs of residents and the increased demand. In the private rented sector there is a lack of affordable properties and it is getting harder to be accepted by many landlords or their agents.

There are, however, many positives including some of the projects being worked on by an enthusiastic and hard working team of officers. Support is being given from other

internal services, there is good joint working with external partners and we are participating in a complex care leaver support pilot scheme which will include mental health, the probation service and the drug and alcohol support team. Much work has been done with getting the homeless off the streets during the pandemic which has been quite a challenge but there has been success in getting many permanent places. The challenges are huge and we are extremely fortunate in having such a dedicated team of officers who are working extremely hard during these challenging times.

You may remember that at the January Full Council I brought a motion to ask the government to extend virtual meetings beyond May. We have received a response from Rt Hon Robert Jenrick to say that this is going to be difficult because it requires primary legislation and fitting it into the parliamentary timetable is going to be practically impossible. However, he did say that the government will be taking evidence from local authorities as they are not certain what councils think about the possibility of extending the current arrangements. The District Council Network is campaigning to continue to allow the flexibility of holding virtual meetings and I would encourage members to discuss it at your parish council meetings. The more letters of support that we can send to Westminster requesting to be legally allowed to continue to hold virtual meetings, the better the chances that our lobbying will be successful. Certainly attendance at many meetings such as the South West Council and the Heart of the South West has greatly increased since we have had virtual meetings. In the meantime we have to start considering how we can hold face to face meetings if virtual meetings are no longer allowed. Obviously it will be impossible to hold Full Council meetings at BEC and social distance.

You will be aware that officers and myself were shocked and disappointed that North Devon was put in the lowest category regarding the levelling up fund. This was amplified by the news that Torridge, with whom we work closely, was in the top category. Since then Cllr Malcolm Prowse, senior officers and myself have met with our M.P. to discuss possible projects and a way forward. At the time of writing final guidance has not been issued but it appears that the theme for bidding for money for projects has to be linked to transport. At a recent webinar with Rt. Hon Robert Jenrick in answer to a question posed by our chief executive he stated that a bid from North Devon (as we are in category 3) would need to be outstanding to be successful. So we have been issued with a challenge but whatever projects we are able to draw up will undoubtedly be eligible for a bid for other future types of funds, as and when they become available. In the meantime we await the government response to the updated version of the Future High Street fund and thanks go to the team who have worked so hard during the consultation and finalisation of the scheme.

Finally, it was heartening to listen into the recent Policy Development Committee meeting with representatives of the farming community. Although I missed the first part

as I was attending the South West Council Leaders meeting what I heard was a great deal of positivity concerning how the agricultural community is coping with the current challenges. With so many changes taking place such as Brexit, farm payments linked to the environment, new regulations regarding imports and exports and the effects of the pandemic farmers have to be resilient and respond to the new circumstances. That isn't always an easy thing to do.

David Worden