

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 29 SEPTEMBER 2021

LEADER'S REPORT

Since the last Full Council we have continued to work on our corporate priorities, addressing the points raised in the peer review and participating in national and regional forums concerning local government. One of the very important actions which we undertook in August was to appoint the new senior management team. The interview process was very vigorous, lasting up to two hours for each candidate and we had external competition for all the posts. So the interviews in most cases lasted for most of the day. I was extremely pleased with the enthusiasm and ability of those who were appointed and this was demonstrated at the senior management team induction meeting when everyone gave a summary of the vision and ideas they have already had for improvements and implementation during the next twelve months. We now have the senior team more in line with our corporate priorities. You will remember that the peer review pointed out that some staff members have felt that they have been rather working in silos. Hopefully our new structure will help to overcome this. We are continuing to follow up with members of the peer review team the actions we are taking.

I am very conscious that the coronavirus pandemic has caused delay on the progress we otherwise may have made as we have had to adapt to difficult circumstances and at the same time continue providing our customer services. The temptation is, therefore, to want to make up for lost time but I would ask that we show a little patience while our new senior team settle in. They are taking on new responsibilities and it will take a while for some of the projects they are currently working on to be completed or handed over to other staff. With regard to the coronavirus situation the number of Covid cases and relatively low take up of vaccinations in parts of Ilfracombe is a particular concern. As a consequence the enhanced response service is planning on spending two days in the town in early October, knocking on doors, providing a mobile vaccination unit and encouraging those who haven't been vaccinated to do so.

You may have noticed that along with two other District Councils we have been in the national and local media concerning waste and recycling and shortage of HGV drivers. We are currently training some of our staff to become qualified drivers but with Covid and self-isolating it has been a challenge. Fortunately we have managed to maintain our service fairly well and certainly much better than many other District Councils where rounds have been collected three or four days late and in some instances trade waste stopped altogether. From October, our new contract for future leasing of lorries begins and hopefully this will get over the problem of delays because of break downs as the company will provide replacements. It is pleasing that we continue to get many compliments from the public for the work our waste and recycling team are doing. My report also gives me the opportunity to thank those involved in the litter strategy and the practical action that some members have been and will be taking to help maintain an attractive environment in North Devon.

I am delighted that we have entered one of our staff for a national Local Government Chronicle Award. Alex Miles had only been with us a short time before the pandemic began and she was thrown in at the deep end with regard to our resilience work but did an amazing job for the Council which deserves to be recognised. Please do let SMT know of members of staff that deserve praise and thanks for the work they are doing. It boosts morale, makes NDC a pleasant place to work and helps to put a smile on all our faces.

I am constantly amazed at the skill of our customer services team and Sarah Higgins would love members to sit in and listen to how they respond to calls from the public. This could be done either at Lynton House or at BEC. A morning would probably be the best time as that is when the most calls are received but please contact Sarah in advance in order to avoid too many arriving at the same time.

During the summer the Afghan crisis intensified and as you know in North Devon we have agreed to take two families. Secretary of State Robert Jenrick M.P. is very keen for all councils to help even if it is only in taking a few interpreters and their families as we are. Sarah Bentley has so far secured one property in Barnstaple with a new landlady (inspired by the situation) who is also negotiating to buy another home for the evacuees. This is a sensitive issue owing to the shortage of long term lets but these properties would not have been available in the normal letting market. This is a specific response to help support those who helped our troops in Afghanistan. There is also a support group set up to help them settle into Barnstaple and I am very pleased that we are assisting even though it is in a small way.

Thank you to those who attended the housing meeting in the Castle Centre a couple of weeks ago. I think those present were surprised at what we are already doing to help those in housing need. Obviously it is more difficult to assist than when we had a large housing stock of our own. The rise in house prices, high visitor numbers, second homes and increase in properties being used for AirBnB etc. has put enormous pressure on our services. Credit to Nicola Topham, our housing lead, and Jeremy Mann and team for all the effort they are making. Around forty new enquiries from different families each week shows the extent of the problem. We have been putting out comms encouraging prospective landlords to come forward and we are setting up a team to target bringing back empty properties into occupation. Also through the Future High Streets Fund project, we will be looking to develop some flats above the commercial properties, which will be extremely helpful. We have also had a meeting with the North Devon and Torridge Housing Crisis group to discuss further actions which we can take. In addition with Steve Hearse (Torridge) we presented a paper which Ken Miles had written to the recent meeting of the County and Devon M.P's outlining the challenges regarding housing which included a number of asks of government.

Progress with the Local Plan is hopefully going to gather pace. We have a special full council meeting with Torridge in order to set up a joint committee to take this forward on October 5th. We need to get the Supplementary Planning Document on affordable

housing sorted asap as it has become urgent as developers are taking advantage and using the viability card to avoid producing affordables. I understand that the biggest shake-up of the planning system for many years is likely not to take place in the way it was originally suggested. As an authority we had lots of reservations about what was being proposed particularly as it was in some aspects a challenge to local democracy. The current planning system is, however, certainly not perfect.

I am conscious too that we need to continue to make further progress on environment initiatives. I have signed the biosphere document on behalf of the council and I look forward to some more concrete actions to publicise to the public what we are doing to become carbon neutral.

We have also agreed to have a member workshop on October 12th with Jon Triggs, in conjunction with the Local Government Association, prior to the start of the budget setting process so that we can inform our officers of our priorities over the next financial year and beyond. The financial report to Strategy and Resources for the first quarter was encouraging showing that we are on course for a small budget surplus of £9,000 for the current financial year. The uncertainty about future government funding remains though as indications are that the Fair Funding review may be delayed for a further 12 months and the 2022/23 year could be another one-year finance settlement. We need to continue to be a progressive council while at the same time realising the finance and resource constraints. This will be a very important session so I hope as many as possible will be able to participate. It was intended that we did this last year but unfortunately the pandemic got in the way and it didn't happen.

At the time of writing the acquiring of the strategic asset in Barnstaple which you know about is going well and I hope that by the Full Council meeting we will have nearly completed the purchase. This is a major part of our commercialisation strategy and ticks many of our corporate priorities as well. I would like to thank the officers for all their hard work regarding this project.

As the current chair of the Devon District Councils I met with John Hart and reps from Plymouth and Torquay with civil servants about devolution. We discussed the possibility of becoming one of the first counties to take advantage of a new offer to devolve more powers from London. This will not mean a unitary for the whole county but will allow a two tier approach i.e. District and County. As you know we have worked closely with the Districts and County during the pandemic as Team Devon and if successful it could mean more money for the key priorities we have set out. These are basically to :

- Increase the supply of social housing and affordable homes e.g. for key workers
- Create a single pot of national and local funding to improve skills and training to increase business productivity and tackle poverty
- Promote a clean growth agenda that would see Devon achieve net zero carbon emissions with key priorities for transport, housing, energy and land use
- Support local regeneration and investment in coastal and market towns
- Maximise pupil premium to raise the aspirations of Devon's young people and promote social mobility.

The bid is supported by Dartmoor National Park, Torbay and Plymouth and in addition Plymouth want to extend the free port zone into South Hams and West Devon. We have also spoken about this at our monthly meeting with the Devon M.P's asking for their support.

David Worden.