

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 24 NOVEMBER 2021

Leader's Report.

First of all I would like to thank all members who attended Andrew Austen's funeral at the crematorium on November 11th. I am confident that there would have been even more there if it had been at another time as some were at the remembrance services in their own towns or villages. Andrew was someone that I believe I can say that we all liked as he was a real gentleman and a true professional and I know many have put their tributes on the Council's intranet memory page. It is sad that he was taken from us, his friends and family at such an early age and was a terrible shock to staff and members alike.

On a more cheerful note I am delighted that one of our officers was shortlisted in two categories of the prestigious LGC Awards, the biggest celebration of excellence in local government. Alex Miles, the council's Emergency Planning Officer was recognised in the 'Outstanding Individual Contribution' and 'Rising Star' categories. She was nominated by colleagues to acknowledge her role in shaping North Devon Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic - and numerous other emergency planning incidents - since she joined the organisation in November 2019. Alex was interviewed by a judging panel made up of senior and influential figures within local government. Unfortunately she did not win this time but even to be shortlisted when considered against much larger authorities was an honour and we are very proud of her achievements. As a council we are very fortunate to have so many talented members of staff.

Like all the Districts in Devon we were disappointed not to receive anything from the leveling up fund this year. Our submission would have given a real boost to Ilfracombe and we can only hope that we are considered favourably next year. Most of the funding on this occasion appears to have gone to the north of the UK. However, some projects for our area through the Community Renewal Fund have been successful. The Biosphere Foundation CIC will receive finance for an integrated economic and environmental development programme, led by the Biosphere Foundation, which seeks to leverage Torrington and Northern Devon's rural and coastal natural capital, as well as the recently remobilised Appledore Shipyard. Petroc's project which seeks to utilise new digital technology (AR, VR, MR) and knowledge transfer to fast track innovation and upskilling across business in Northern Devon is also due to get funding. So too is a project led by Petroc College in partnership with Northern Devon partners, focused on filling gaps within existing youth and community provision to create a single programme which will support young people in rural / coastal Devon to return to work and learning.

We have been working with Team Devon (Devon County Council and the other Devon District Councils) in relation to a Household Support Fund which will assist households facing financial hardship this winter. North Devon's share is £128,000. The fund is for emergency short term support for households facing financial hardship this winter, helping them to cover the cost of food, increased energy and water bills and/or any related essential costs (e.g., such as but not limited to saucepans, jumpers, blankets, boiler service, white goods). Each application will be assessed on its own merits with the scheme running up to March 2022.

We held a Northern Devon Futures meeting on Monday 25 October 2021 and the Principal and CEO of Petroc, Sean Mackney was elected as chair. The partnership will agree its vision, aims and objectives at its next meeting, following consultation. The draft vision proposed is set out below but might need tightening up to be a bit more specific

'The Vision of the Partnership is that by 2050 Northern Devon is healthy, prosperous and sustainable, recognised for its aspiration, innovation, and ability to get things done. A place where all are able to succeed and no one is left behind.'

The CEO, Ken Miles and myself had lunch recently with the vice chancellor/CEO of Exeter University and she is keen to promote the research work that they are doing regarding climate change. Something I think we should pursue. Since the last Full Council we had the official opening of NodeCowork Enterprise Centre. We will miss getting funding from the EU for such projects but hopefully the area will be able to take advantage of the forthcoming UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which is intended to replace EU funding.

We have also had a meeting with the Arts Council following their decision to prioritise support for North Devon for the next three years. As a result Alison Mills is going to produce a policy for NDC considering coordinating the Arts in North Devon. Although no concrete projects have been put forward yet I am hopeful that we will be looked upon favourably and be given financial support.

We had an informal Housing Panel meeting to hear from a number of stakeholders and gather views on what the housing crisis means for individual and organisations and what can be done to resolve it. We heard from housebuilders, voluntary groups, Homes England and also the Torridge and North Devon Home Crisis group. We will be holding another Panel meeting in a couple of weeks' time meeting with our partners who presented to us last time. At this meeting, where we will debate what we can do as an authority to help meet the challenges we face and consider the manifesto produced by the Home Crisis group, we plan to come up with recommendations for clear actions which can be taken. This will form the basis of our housing delivery programme moving

forward. Each of the new heads of service are working on a programme to deliver in their service areas based on our revised corporate plan objectives.

Our CEO has been talking to Superintendent Toby Davies and the police concerning anti-social behaviour in the centre of Barnstaple. As a result patrols have now started which moving forward will involve our staff including some of our car park wardens and also the Place Makers, who were scheduled to start just before Christmas but will now be starting earlier. It is important that we do our part in making Barnstaple as attractive to visitors as possible, particularly in the lead up to Christmas. You may have heard that the flower beds at Imperial Gardens on Taw Vale in Barnstaple are getting a makeover thanks to the North Devon Parks team.

Taking inspiration from the beautiful Olympic Park meadows which were sown for the London Olympics in 2012, the layout will be altered by removing the circular bedding and outside beds and replacing them with a spiral wildflower meadow with a central feature such as a sculpture or tree. A nectar-rich annual and perennial wildflower mix will be planted for biodiversity and for attracting pollinators, as well as visual attractiveness.

It was pleasing that Barnstaple received a silver award in the Britain in Bloom competition this year and I hope that they will continue to enter next year. Forgive me for mentioning too South Molton in Bloom who won the gold award in the category they entered.

We are celebrating Green Flag Awards as the scheme marks its Silver Jubilee. Bicclescombe Park in Ilfracombe and Yeo Valley Community Woodland in Barnstaple are celebrating their award yet again. It is the 17th consecutive year that Bicclescombe Park has achieved Green Flag status and for Yeo Valley Community Woodland it is the tenth time in a row. It is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our parks teams and the volunteer groups who have made them great spaces that everyone can enjoy.

Some of you may have noticed that the North Devon Gazette has a new format and that I have started writing a weekly column for it in my capacity as Leader of NDC. I am pleased that it gives us the opportunity of sharing some of the many good things that our council is doing. If you have something that the council is doing in your area that is outstanding news, please let me know and hopefully I will be able to include it.

As you know we have received the feedback report from the Local Government Association corporate peer challenge refresh. Many of the comments are extremely encouraging and I am tempted to emphasis them all in my report. However, I will content myself with just one of the conclusions. 'Celebrate your successes! You have delivered on many of the ambitions/recommendations we noted when we were with you 18 months ago and have created a springboard for continuing to move forward – you have all the pieces in place including the trust and support of your workforce – it is now within your gift to capitalise on this opportunity, maintain focus and deliver on the potential.'

We will consider all the findings in detail and use them to help us continue to improve as a council. Despite the pandemic I believe that we can be proud of the progress we are making.

David Worden
November '21.