

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 12 JANUARY 2022

Leader's Report

May I begin by wishing everyone a happy, prosperous, healthy and safe 2022. Given the rapidly changing Omicron situation, I am concerned that the government hasn't, at least at the time of writing, announced that virtual meetings be given full backing to make legal decisions. It seems to me sensible to refrain from as many indoor face to face meetings as possible at the moment. We begin the New Year facing many challenges but also many opportunities.

Despite the pandemic, good progress was made during 2021 and we now need to build upon our successes. Last year's peer review was extremely encouraging and the presentation by the senior officers before Christmas of suggested programmes for the next few years showed that we are a forward looking Council. It is important that we don't sit on our laurels but continue to make progress. Our senior officer's team is beginning to make an impact which brought the following comment in the corporate peer challenge report - "We saw so many green shoots of optimism across the organisation with the majority of our original recommendations in respect of organisational leadership and capacity progressed with impressive impetus and success."

Since the last full council meeting we have had the strategic prioritisation workshop which I believe was ground breaking and showed the programmes of work which are planned to be developed. Although I appreciate that it was held during the busy run up to Christmas, I was particularly disappointed that over half the members of council did not attend as it is important that we own what is being planned and work together to move forward as a team, irrespective of party politics, for the benefit of North Devon. We moved away from the strong leadership model for the council because that involved only a small section of the members in setting our agendas as we wanted everyone to be part of the priority setting process. I would encourage you to watch the recording of the workshop if you were unable to attend before Christmas. For a council of our size we are planning ambitious programmes of work and if members are unhappy with what is being proposed it would be extremely helpful to know at this stage rather than down the line when a lot of unnecessary work will have been completed.

As you realise the draft programmes cover specific areas of work and will each be led

by a Head of Service. They cover our corporate priorities of Environmental Enhancement, Housing and Community Safety, Economic Regeneration, Customer Focus and Organisational Development. There is also an overarching programme covering Financial Stability. Each programme draws together work being undertaken or planned in all of the service areas. Each member should have received copies of the draft programmes and so if you have any comments let me know. Please be aware that we will need to increase the establishment to provide the capacity and resources to carry out what is being planned. This will be a reversal of the trend for the last decade when the numbers of staff have been reduced.

This year we will need to push on with the Joint Local Plan with Torrington. Thank you for those who attended the Joint Local Plan workshops last year. They proved to be useful in gathering ideas which will be helpful as we develop our vision for northern Devon. Hopefully too we will be able to make further progress this year with our partners through the North Devon Futures programme.

It's good news that shortly we will be in a position to give further financial support to some businesses. The Chancellor has announced that there is to be a support package and at the time of writing we are currently waiting the full details of what it entails. The software will soon be written and we will be able to distribute funds to those who qualify. Businesses in the hospitality and leisure sectors in England will be eligible for one-off grants of up to £6,000 per premises. In addition funds have been announced for the Additional Restrictions Grant. Details will be announced on our website to ensure as many businesses in our area can benefit as possible as these grants are a vital life line during these uncertain times.

This year we also have some exciting projects to progress including the schemes around the Future High Street funding in Barnstaple, the development of Seven Brethren, the Water Sports Centre in Ilfracombe and some important work to do around issues such as housing and the environment. We will also be working to build in the required capacity and resource to deliver the forward looking programmes we are developing. All of the new Heads of Service have been working with members to draw up projects to help make a difference. More details about this will emerge in the next few weeks. It is going to be really important during the next few weeks to prioritise with regard to our budget this year as we have so many ideas of what we would like to do. Like the staff I am keen to get on and achieve benefits for North Devon so despite all the possible negative unknowns I am really excited about what the future will bring.

David Worden

January 2022.