

## **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 23 FEBRUARY 2022**

### **Leader's Report**

Councillors Steve Darling (Torbay), Alan Connett (Teignbridge), Federica Smith-Roberts, Leader of Somerset West and Taunton Council and myself wrote an email to Secretary of State Michael Gove M.P. prior to the announcement of the Levelling Up agenda concerning the Midas Group. As you are no doubt aware that Midas Group, including its construction arm Midas Construction, and its housing division Mi-Space filed notice of its intention to appoint Administrators. This is a significant concern for our region - they are the ninth largest private sector firm in the southwest with a turnover of £291m and 498 direct employees, however the employment through their subcontractors is vast. Although North Devon isn't going to be impacted as much as many other areas it is a concern and so we requested that the Government give serious consideration as to how they can intervene to smooth the economic impact of this business challenge for MIDAS group and their subcontractors for the wider benefit of the entire region. Subsequently we have heard the government's levelling up strategy which includes primarily Cornwall and the north of England. I must admit to being disappointed that rural areas again appear to have missed out.

However, at the time of writing the news has just broken that Devon has been included in the proposals for a new County Deal to include Plymouth, Torbay, Devon County Council and the eight District Councils. We had submitted on behalf of all the Devon councils a joint bid for a combined authority (not a unitary) which ruled out the need for an elected mayor. Team Devon has proved to be very successful during the pandemic and this has enabled us to put forward a united front on many issues. What will it mean for North Devon is the obvious question and at this stage we don't really know the answer! Hopefully it will result in giving us more powers to make decisions more locally and provide some financial assistance to make the most of the opportunities we have. If we can get the additional resources we need to deliver more and better jobs, the affordable housing that is so essential and boost Devon's reputation as a place to do business, then we shouldn't stand on the sidelines - but grasp what is available, work with Government and continue together to lobby for Devon but at the moment it is a case of watch this space.

It appears that the Government would like a directly elected mayor for County deals or the powers that are given will be limited. Do you think an elected mayor for Devon is a good idea? Please do let me know your opinion. So far the leaders of the Plymouth, Torbay, Devon County and the District Councils (including myself) have all stated that they are opposed to the idea but fewer powers and funding will be given to areas which do not have a directly elected mayoral model so it is worth at least considering. It is potentially good news that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will be devolved to local leaders and distributed via an allocation methodology rather than through a competitive bidding process. So much time has been taken up by officers preparing bids for funding

for various projects with no certainty that they would receive any funds at the end of the process.

However, members may know that we put in a last minute bid for money for ICT and I am delighted that we have been successful in securing £150,000 from the government to help us to further improve our cyber security measures and another £150,000 to allow us to improve our planning ICT and processes. I am delighted that our Planning Service is working hard to help tackle the housing crisis in North Devon, with the team recently ranked the second highest performing authority in the southwest in the government performance tables. The ratings are based on the number of applications processed between 1 October and 31 December last year within the agreed time. Our planning officers are working hard to make a positive difference but the challenge regarding providing homes to rent is a great one. Lead member for Housing, Councillor Nicola Topham, Ken Miles, Jeremy Mann and myself recently met with representatives of the Housing Crisis group to discuss short, medium and long term ways of increasing supply in the rent sector. We continue to work on our ten point plan and listen to ideas concerning how we can help those who need homes and give advice to assist others who are in danger of becoming homeless because they cannot pay the bills. For example, in response to the escalating fuel costs, we launched a home energy advice service at the end of 2021, together with local community energy company 361 Energy, to help those most at risk of fuel poverty.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking Jon Triggs and his team for all the hard work they have put in regarding preparing our budget for 2022-23. We are indeed very fortunate to have such a dedicated and talented team who are doing an excellent job managing our finances. In setting out the financial plans to Full Council this budget aims to deliver upon the programmes which members supported when our Heads of Service presented to us in December. Yes we are proposing just under 10p a week increase on Band D properties and a small increase in our fees but it must be remembered that we too are impacted by higher costs, such as increases to energy bills, higher fuel costs for our vehicle fleet and inflation impacts upon our suppliers and contractors. Inflation has been running at over 5% recently and the projection is that it will further increase. This budget does mark a change in direction for the Council, and if you like; a change of mindset reflecting the recommendations from the LGA peer review. Our organisation has shrunk by 94 staff (19%) over the last 12 years but demand for our services has increased over this period; so in order to deliver 'more than we were 12 years ago' we have identified the need to add back some posts into the establishment to deliver our programmes. Growing the organisation provides us a chance to maintain and improve current services, meet our corporate priorities, bring more income into the authority to invest in further future programmes and also bridge our medium term budget gap forecasts.

David Worden

February 2022.