

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 23 NOVEMBER 2022

LEADER'S REPORT

Since the last full council meeting the news which has hit the headlines involves the use of Dilkhusa Grand Hotel as a contingency hotel to accommodate asylum seekers. When we heard last month that this might happen we wrote to the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes, the Home Office accommodation provider, raising significant concerns over the process and the suitability of Ilfracombe for this type of accommodation. At a multi-agency forum on Friday 7 October, we and other agencies repeated concerns that Ilfracombe is an unsuitable location for use as asylum accommodation due to its remoteness, over stretched services and the likely impact of the loss of an operating hotel on the local economy. Following this, on Thursday 13th October, we were advised that a decision had been made not to progress the hotel as asylum contingency accommodation. However, the Home Office obviously changed their minds and asylum seekers were bused in overnight near the beginning of this month without the Council being informed. As I have said we were not consulted or formally notified about this change in direction from the Home Office, nor do we have a full understanding at this stage of their intentions for the hotel's future use. We recognise our responsibility to help people seeking safety in the UK but it is important that as a Council we are kept informed with what is happening at the Dilkhusa as it is of great concern to many North Devon residents and our service providers. We wait to see developments and I hope it doesn't result in more pressure upon our housing department. The number of those presenting themselves as homeless or potentially homeless is a concern.

On a positive note, it was a great pleasure to be part of the replanting of the alder tree at Bicclescombe Park, Ilfracombe at the end of October. The tree had once been part of the Platinum Jubilee sculpture outside of Buckingham Palace and was gifted to North Devon. Thanks go to Lady Arran for obtaining the tree for us and we chose the sensory gardens in Bicclescombe Park as an ideal venue for this tribute to our late Queen. The trees are said to stand for hope, regeneration and optimism and are part of a million trees already planted across the UK as part of the Queen's Green Canopy in honour of Her Majesty.

Attendees at the tree planting ceremony included North Devon Council and Ilfracombe Town Council representatives, Lady Arran, Deputy Member of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament - Tymek Kiliszek, Ilfracombe's Community Resources Group, representatives from The Earth Repair Shop, members of the public, as well as Clive Thomas, a local retired vicar who gave his blessing at the gathering. We also have a large commemorative vase which is to be resident in the Mill café in Bicclescombe Park.

Last month I also had the pleasure of helping to launch Northern Devon's new Culture Strategy in Barnstaple's Square, along with the Leader of Torrington Council, Councillor Ken James, Philip Butterworth from Arts Council England and Alison Mills from Barnstaple Museum. This event gave an opportunity for a number of cultural

organisations to show case their work in our area. “Flourishing Culture: The Northern Devon Culture Strategy” has been designed to encourage our cultural sector and provide opportunities for growth right across northern Devon. There are three main themes: helping people blossom; development of cultural hubs; and helping places thrive. Throughout northern Devon we have a great heritage and some amazing talent which as a council we want to encourage and help to flourish. Culture can play an important part in providing significant wellbeing benefits in addition to increasing economic prosperity for our residents. The strategy we have adopted explores the nature of culture in its many different forms and we hope to explore opportunities to attract investment in all cultural areas and encourage residents to get creative and experience brilliant culture in their towns and villages. Since then we have heard the good news that the Barnstaple and North Devon Museum is to receive £285,000 and the Queen’s Theatre, Barnstaple and the Landmark Theatre, Ilfracombe a total of £3 million from the Arts Council.

May I take the opportunity of reminding everyone that there are some fascinating exhibitions and events taking place in our museums. For example, I enjoyed seeing the new exhibition which accompanies the publication of a new book edited by Dr. Todd Gray, exploring 17th century Barnstaple. You may have heard of the recent discovery in the Bodleian Library, Oxford of a detailed map of Barnstaple during 1650 by Richard Newcourt. This is quite exciting as it is some 200 years earlier than any known map of the area and is part of the Barnstaple exhibition. This map together with items from the museum and South West Heritage Trust collections, including paintings, the Abbott family sketchbook, architectural fragments, cannon balls and documents aims to create a picture of Barnstaple in 1650. You might like to see how Barnstaple has changed since the 17th century.

We have recently heard that Council staff have accepted the award of a significant pay rise. I am pleased that the possibility of a national strike of council employees has been avoided and the staff are being rewarded for the excellent work which they do. However, despite the projection that in other areas we are doing well financially we are faced with making tough decisions to balance the budget as the wage bill is forecast to be £800,000 more than we originally thought for this financial year and this will be ongoing for future years. With inflation running at over 10%, fuel and energy costs rising we are going to need to increase our fees and charges as well as look for ways to make money or provide savings. Thank you to the members who attended the two budget meetings which have been organized by Jon Triggs. It is helpful when we work together to explore the best ways of closing the potential budget gap. Like the other District Councils in Devon we are faced with making some unpopular decisions. By the time you read this we will, of course, have had the chancellor’s statement on November 17th and will have a clearer picture of the government’s plans moving forward.

David Worden
November 2022