

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 11 JANUARY 2023

LEADER'S REPORT

May I begin with wishing all Councillors and Staff, a happy and healthy 2023 and express my sincere thanks to all the Council employees for their hard work during 2022. We are truly blessed with a dedicated team who are real credit to the Council. This year will be a year of opportunities but also many challenges including the May elections and the need to balance the budget for 2023/24. You may have seen the District Council's Network (DCN) reaction to the financial settlement for District Councils which included the following:-

"The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement (LGFS) confirms the additional support for district councils announced in the Autumn Statement (17 November) and the finance policy statement (12 December).

- The main elements of increased spending power are the minimum 3% funding guarantee, flexibility to raise council tax levels by 3% and the effective linkage of retained business rates income to Consumer Price Inflation (CPI).
- The total increase to core spending power for district councils will be around 5%, assuming all councils raise council tax by the maximum 3% or £5. This compares to a 9.2% rise for all English councils. The lowest increase in spending power for a district council will be 4.3%."

If we choose to raise the council tax at the February budget meeting by the maximum of 2.99% that will give us an extra just over £32,000 over and above the usual £5 increase on a Band D Council Tax that we have been able to do in recent years. We have, of course, held a couple of important workshops to discuss ways of reducing the projected budget gap of £2 million for next year. Increased energy bills, fuel prices, commodities and staff pay are the main areas for which increased costs exceed our original assumptions. On top of that, we are seeing higher demand for particular services such as temporary accommodation and so costs are exceeding our budget in some areas. The increase in potential homelessness is a real concern. I would like to highlight the good work that Sarah Bentley and team has done with our partners regarding the Ukrainian refugees. North Devon residents have been amazing in their response to the war in Ukraine. I am concerned, however, that we could find ourselves with further pressure on housing from migrants if the government expects local authorities to find long term accommodation when the temporary measure of housing them in hotels is brought to an end.

Having mentioned our financial restraints it is, however, good to see some of our long term projects progressing. We should see during 2023 projects such as the Watersports Centre at Ilfracombe, Future High Streets and Seven Brethren projects in Barnstaple either completed or significantly progressed.

The temporary closure, from this month, of the Barnstaple Pannier Market will see traders moving into Green Lanes Shopping Centre whilst works take place as part of the Market Quarter regeneration project. The decision to close the market and temporarily relocate the market traders in the early part of 2023 was taken as the market is at its lowest capacity at this time of year and will allow the successful contractors to work efficiently, thereby reducing the overall disruption to the market, local businesses and other stakeholders.

Planning permission has been granted and the proposed works will include:

- Refurbishment of the market street toilets to provide: An entrance from the market as well as the existing entrance from market street, five unisex toilets, one baby changing facility with adult WC and child WC as well as one disabled toilet
- Relocation of the office to the old Pannier Market café
- Repairs to the roof including gutters and windows
- Redecoration
- Glazing of doors to Butchers Row
- Refurbishment of corn store into an insulated/self-contained space and traders' storage area
- Relocation of storage/bins area to rear wall adjacent to Queens Theatre
- External refurbishment works to The Guildhall

I am delighted that we have begun the planting of 24,000 trees to extend the Yeo Valley Community Woodland which will provide a legacy for many years to come and help in the fight against climate change. This will be a wonderfully improved resource for the local community and will also help capture carbon and improve biodiversity. I would like to give a big thank you to all the volunteers who have been helping with the planting and the team who have helped to make this happen.

One disappointing situation to report has been the anti-social behaviour in the centre of Barnstaple and particularly in the central car park toilets. North Devon Council and Devon and Cornwall Police have partnered for an evening of action against antisocial behaviour and have taken part in a series of initiatives designed to prevent antisocial behaviour and incidents of violence against women and girls, as well as increasing feelings of safety in the town. However, following repeated incidents of discarded needles and drug paraphernalia being found in the cubicles, very reluctantly we closed the central car park toilets as a temporary measure. Toilets are available in M&S and Green Lanes but I am concerned about drug users going to other parts of the town. So we need a long term solution.

May I also urge members to get involved in the review of the Joint Local Plan. This plan is an important part of the spatial strategy of our Council and leading up to Christmas the attendance at the working groups was disappointing. Please would members of all political groups take this seriously and fully participate like most Torridge councillors have so far been doing. This is not something which should be left to a small number of councillors because it involves all our wards and communities and decisions will affect the lives of all our residents. We continue to receive planning applications for land outside of the current local plan and this will be a challenge for us until we can demonstrate a five year land supply.

This year we need to push on with our strategic corporate plans including making further progress towards our target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero carbon by 2030. Through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme we received Salix funding to carry out energy surveys of all the Council's owned/occupied properties (13 in total) and we got reports showing how we can save energy and reduce running costs, as well as move away from using fossil fuels such as gas or oil to provide heating and hot water in those buildings. Many of the measures identified in the reports have a quick payback and we have set aside approx. £100,000 to implement these, replacing older lights and fittings with low energy ones and installing more passive infrared sensors in our buildings so that lights are not left on unnecessarily. It is important that we invest in renewable energy generation, and we are working on two projects to install solar panels at Barnstaple Pannier Market and Brynsworthy.

During 2022, Mark Kentell's team worked really hard to keep our Waste and Recycling service going, amongst a backdrop of driver (and staff) shortages and the team have identified that growth in Waste and Recycling material has outgrown the current facility infrastructure at Brynsworthy. So we need to invest a substantial amount of money to revise our yard layout and install new equipment that will allow us to operate more efficiently and enable the sorting process to provide better quality materials to sell, with less contamination and less waste. The hard work of our crews and the cooperation of our residents means that North Devon has recycling rates above the national average (our rates about 50% for the last two years) which is encouraging but we must strive to do even better.

There is a lot to do but I believe that as a Council we are making progress and I look forward to what 2023 has in store for us.

David Worden

January 2023.