

## **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 22 FEBRUARY 2023**

### **LEADER'S REPORT**

You will no doubt be aware of Torridge Council's being promised over £15,000,000 by the government for the proposed Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre in the second round of the Levelling Up Fund. This will give a big boost to Appledore and the wider northern Devon area and establish a leading research and development destination for innovation into clean maritime technology. Unfortunately North Devon Council wasn't one of the winners in the latest round of the so-called levelling up fund. Our bid to improve the sea defences and regenerate the sea front area of Ilfracombe was not successful. One of the problems of having to bid for funds is that officers spend hours on preparation with no guarantee that the schemes will be accepted. This is very time consuming and is difficult for small authorities where staff resources are already stretched to the limit in running the normal services. However, we, along with our partners, will review our application in the light of anticipated feedback and hopefully bid again for future funding as the government has promised another round of the levelling up funds. Ilfracombe is a town which suffers from a lot of deprivation and an injection of money for a regeneration project would be a real step forward for the town and area. As a council we are very conscious of the need but we haven't got the finances to make the significant impact which is required to really make a difference and so desperately need government assistance. That said, we will be investing in some smaller scale seafront enhancements this year.

However, we have been allocated just over £1m from the Local Authority Housing Fund. This is a scheme which is intended to take the pressure off temporary accommodation caused by people from Ukraine presenting as homeless after their placements finish. The scheme provides funds for local authorities to deliver additional housing to act as temporary accommodation for Ukrainians coming off the placement scheme and to act as affordable homes once they are no longer needed for that purpose. Local authorities need to find 60% of the overall costs of the housing with this fund providing the 40%. Unfortunately there are some extremely challenging timescales around the scheme with monies needing to be spent by November 2023. We have to submit an expression of interest before looking at the contract that the government will require us to sign. In the meantime, officers are actively searching for properties that we could purchase and are also looking at possible schemes to deliver suitable housing through modular build etc. If we go for this scheme and I believe that we should, we will have to borrow to make up the 60% shortfall in government funding. As a council we have been informed that we will need to provide accommodation for 66 refugees. This isn't unique to us as the numbers have been worked out for each authority on the number of residents in the area basis but we already have a housing crisis situation.

What would also be very helpful is if the government revisited the Community Led Trust schemes and allocated some more funding so that we can move forward with several schemes in our area to provide affordables and social rent properties.

I am far from happy that for years the government funding support received for public services in rural areas like North Devon is much lower per head of population than that received by those who live in cities. As a result, those public services and the residents, businesses and communities who rely on them are greatly disadvantaged. We would not be facing such tough decisions regarding our budget if the 2012 agreed formula for local government funding had been implemented. In 2023/24, I am told that urban areas will receive 59% more in government grants per head than rural ones. On average residents in rural areas pay £109.73 (20.3%) per head more in Council Tax and get less services. It is time that government realized that providing services like waste and recycling costs a lot more in rural settings than it does in urban ones and acted accordingly. A redistribution and increase of the existing support to rural areas like North Devon would not cost the government any more but would be much fairer on our residents. We are a low wage area and have to make decisions to increase council tax because of the current unfair system.

I don't think that the current proposed Devon Devolution deal will make much difference either. Especially so, as if the deal eventually goes ahead we are not likely to get anything other than the additional powers ordinarily devolved to non-mayoral areas. Not much has happened recently in this area and it isn't likely to be resolved quickly. In the meantime I believe that we need to continue working together across parties in Team Devon. You will have probably heard that Donna Manson formerly of a Highland Council in Scotland has been appointed as the new Devon Chief Executive. It is important to continue to working together wherever possible in making joint responses to the cost of living crisis, refugees and making asks of the government etc.

Of course, we have the District Elections this year. Personally I am not happy that the Government has prioritized bringing in a voter ID system which will mean additional work for our staff when cases of electoral fraud has been so few. The postal vote applications are likely to rocket, and we will need to find more staff to man the polling stations. It is likely to cause some people not to vote particularly as they won't understand the new process or possess photographic identification. Democracy will suffer in my opinion which is something which we don't want as the percentage voting is already disappointing in many local government elections.

Another area of concern is the Joint Local Plan with Torridge. This is going to be disrupted by the elections and new personnel will be involved. As a consequence and for many other reasons I believe that we should only be attempting a focused review or update at this time. We are facing many challenges at this time but it is pleasing that the rejuvenation of the Pannier Market is now underway but we have kept the Barnstaple central car park toilets closed a little longer to discourage drug abuse and anti-social behaviour in that area. On the positive side are fortunate in the support we are getting from our partners. For example, the North Devon Futures Group are meeting

now on a regular basis and progress is being made in our response to the environment. It has been disappointing though to hear of the disappearance of the spades used by volunteers for the planting of the trees in the Yeo Valley Woodland extension.