

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 15 MARCH 2023

LEADER'S REPORT

As this is the last full council meeting before the elections in May please excuse me for reminiscing on our last four years. I believe that we should be really proud of what we have achieved despite the Covid pandemic. It was in itself a major achievement to have maintained our services during the height of the pandemic but we also did much more.

The Local Government Association Peer Challenge reported to the Full Council last year on their second visit since the last election. They said, "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."

Their final conclusion was "Celebrate your successes! You have delivered on many of the ambitions/recommendations we noted when we were with you 18 months ago and have created a springboard for continuing to move forward – you have all the pieces in place including the trust and support of your workforce – it is now within your gift to capitalise on this opportunity, maintain focus and deliver on the potential."

We have many successes to celebrate including the completion of the new North Devon Leisure Centre and the purchase of Green Lanes Shopping Centre. We have major schemes underway including the Ilfracombe Water Sports Centre and the rejuvenation of Barnstaple Pannier Market, Butchers Row and area. In addition many schemes have come about through the S106 funding. We have begun planting 25,000 trees to enhance the environment and since June we have brought over 30 empty homes back into occupation and we are currently working on another 134 empty /unoccupied properties. Our Outreach team is making our town streets safer and housing the homeless and we have assisted refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. We have increased partnership working with groups like the County Council / Petroc / One Northern Devon / NHS / Police / Charities / Pickwell Foundation / North Devon + and we are planning for the next quarter of a century with Northern Devon Futures. Our 'Flourishing Culture' strategy will help to enhance the well being of all and we are encouraging creativity of the Arts in the broadest sense. We have reorganised our senior management team and I am delighted by the way many of our staff have adapted to a hybrid approach of working from home or in the office. As a Council we have increased our influence in the region through Team Devon, Devon District Forum and the HotSW. I believe that we have listened to residents' views and encouraged people

to buy locally wherever possible. All of this and more has been achieved against a backdrop of reduced funding in real terms but we have managed to set balanced budgets each year.

There is much more to be done as we face many challenges as an authority. We don't know the outcome of discussions concerning a devolution deal for Devon or if and when it might be implemented. We face financial challenges made worse by the unfair funding of rural areas by national government. We must continue to challenge for leveling up funds for our area and Ilfracombe in particular. Although we have taken many actions we have nowhere near enough properties for permanent affordable rent and there is rising poverty and homelessness demand in our area. The staggering rise in the cost of living and inflation coupled with poor connectivity, low wages, low productivity and low skills mean that we need cooperation from all our partners to attempt to improve the situation. It is important that we continue to campaign for improved infrastructure, support for the needs of our farmers, the hospitality industry and coastal areas and, indeed, for all our residents.

One area I am concerned about is Devon County Council's proposal to:

- Close the North Devon Link Service Drop-in centres in Barnstaple, Bideford and Ilfracombe.
- Close the North Devon Link Service drop-in service that run out of those buildings and work with current service users to confirm their needs and agree alternative support.
- To cease providing outreach support to those people in receipt of Care Act, 2014 eligible services, including assessments and instead provide this support in different ways to be agreed with current service users.

The consultation ends on 8th April 2023, and if implemented will have a knock on effect on our services. The consultation document is on the Devon County Council Have Yours Say Webpage: <https://forms.office.com/e/ZarkSQnxjV>, where you can submit your views on the proposals.

I know that we have several weeks left of this Council yet but this is the last Full Council meeting so may I take the opportunity to thank you for your support during the last four years. I would also like to put on record my thanks to all those who will not be seeking re-election in May for their work for their communities. Some have served on this Council for many years and we will miss their experience but I do hope that they will enjoy their retirement once the term of the Council comes to an end.

David Worden

March 2023