

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 4 OCTOBER 2023

LEADER'S REPORT

Over the past few months, I've embarked on a series of visits to our local parish and town councils within the region. Following my recent meeting with Ilfracombe Town Council, I continued my visits to Lynton and Lynmouth Town Council, Braunton Parish Council, and South Molton Town Council. These visits provided a valuable opportunity to connect with town and parish councillors, enabling me to gain insight into the fundamental challenges they face at the grassroots level of our local democracy.

I'm pleased to report that these visits have been exceptionally productive, with positive feedback from all participants expressing a desire for regular engagement. Indeed, our collaboration has expedited the resolution of certain issues, reinforcing the importance of these interactions. I eagerly anticipate maintaining this ongoing dialogue and continuing to build stronger connections within our community.

I was also delighted to extend a warm welcome to Jon Beake, Regional Employment Engagement Director of Defence Relationship Management, and Wing Commander Alex Drake, Air Regional Employer Engagement Officer, as they joined our Strategy and Resources committee for the official signing of the Armed Forces Covenant. This covenant is grounded in two fundamental principles:

1. Ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community do not encounter disadvantages when accessing public and commercial services, ensuring parity with other members of our community.
2. Acknowledging the need for special consideration in certain instances, particularly for those who have made significant sacrifices, including the injured and bereaved individuals who have given their utmost.

The covenant will be reviewed annually to ensure we are meeting its obligations.

I had the pleasure of attending Petroc's launch event for The Environmental Space Living Lab (ESLL), coinciding with the successful completion of phase II of the Cotie Innovation Launchpad facility at North Devon Campus. The ESLL represents a fusion of state-of-the-art equipment and real-world testing environments, providing a platform for farmers and other stakeholders to tackle agricultural, aquacultural, and broader environmental challenges through the adoption of innovative, space-related technologies. This endeavour involves collaborative partnerships with technology providers and academia.

Supported by funding from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and spearheaded by the Satellite Applications Catapult, the ESLL will establish a presence in three locations across the South West. It will serve as a showcase environment to initiate trials and demonstrations of sustainable agricultural and environmental technologies.

In addition to the ESLL, the expansion of Petroc's Cotie Innovation Launchpad offers local entrepreneurs and small businesses access to cutting-edge augmented/virtual reality and immersive technologies for content creation and collaboration, fostering innovation in products, services, and processes while facilitating business growth. These valuable resources, funded by the European Regional Development Fund, complement the existing facilities, which include a development zone equipped with 3D manufacturing technology, conference facilities, open-plan hot-desking spaces with high-spec PCs, a cleanroom, and design pods.

I, along with fellow councillors, recently participated in a webinar focused on the state of dentistry provision in Devon. The pressing issue at hand revolves around the insufficient investment in this vital service and the pressing need to establish realistic NHS contracts with dentists. This situation has inadvertently led to the emergence of "dental deserts" in North Devon, characterised by limited NHS dental access and alarming levels of oral health inequality.

Recruitment and retention challenges within the dental workforce have been identified as a significant contributing factor to this problem. For far too long, rural areas like ours have grappled with overstretched NHS dental services, resulting in individuals enduring pain and, in some cases, resorting to self-extraction of teeth or paying exorbitant fees for urgent treatment. Despite their dedication, dentists are facing an uphill battle due to escalating costs and a growing number of retirements.

The Conservative government has allowed this situation to persist for an extended period, and it is crucial that government ministers take immediate and resolute action to tackle this dental crisis. The first step should involve a thorough overhaul of NHS dental contracts to expand appointment availability and guarantee equitable compensation for the invaluable work of dentists.

Councillor Ian Roome

September 2023