

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 22 NOVEMBER 2023

LEADER'S REPORT

In recent months, I've actively participated in numerous meetings alongside other council leaders. Additionally, I've engaged in workshops organised by the North Devon Council aimed at assessing our council's financial standing. It's evident that our budget has consistently decreased in real terms year after year. This financial strain is a common experience among most councils, compelling them to tap into their reserves to maintain financial equilibrium.

Rising inflation, the National Living Wage, escalating energy expenses, and a persistent surge in service demand are collectively imposing significant additional financial burdens on councils merely to maintain the current level of services.

The ability of to alleviate these considerable pressures is consistently hindered by short-term funding allocations, sporadic financial injections, and uncertainty stemming from repeated delays in funding reforms.

This conservative government must urgently devise a comprehensive, long-range strategy to adequately finance local services. This necessitates providing councils with greater funding certainty through multi-year settlements and offering clearer guidelines on financial reforms. Such measures would enable councils to strategize effectively, balance conflicting demands across various service domains, and optimise the efficacy of their expenditure. This really is a cross-party stance and is being led by the Local Government Association (LGA).

As a council, we must grapple with challenging choices to secure the implementation of a resilient financial strategy, encompassing both short-term and medium-term objectives.

Analysis conducted by the LGA, representing councils across England, reveals a striking 89 percent surge in the number of households residing in temporary accommodation over the past decade. By the end of March 2023, this figure had reached 104,000 households, marking the highest recorded numbers since data collection commenced in 1998. This surge has incurred expenses for councils amounting to at least £1.74 billion in the fiscal year 2022/23.

The acute shortage of social housing in North Devon has coerced us into footing the bill for housing individuals in temporary private accommodations, such as hotels and B&Bs, as they await a permanent residence. The diminishing availability of housing is exacerbated by the escalating cost of living and stagnant Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates. These factors contribute to a rise in homelessness while simultaneously limiting councils' capacity to secure suitable accommodations. I along with other councils signed a letter from the District Councils Network to ask the chancellor for more funding to help councils address the issues.

At North Devon Council, we have decided to invest in acquiring our own temporary accommodation. This strategic move has alleviated the financial strain significantly. From my perspective, it's imperative that we continue exploring and considering this option as a means to consistently lower our overall expenses.

I participated in a collaborative meeting between North Devon Council and North Devon Homes, our primary social housing provider in the region. It was encouraging to learn about the positive shared outcomes resulting from our collaborative efforts, aimed at enhancing the well-being of our residents and tackling homelessness. This partnership is very important to the council as by working together we can achieve so much more.

Being a veteran it was an honour to attend various Remembrance Services and Parades to remember those that lost their lives in various conflicts around the world. I was pleased to see so many councillors attending in their own localities to pay their respects.

Councillor Ian Roome

November 2023