

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL
POLICY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE: 11TH JANUARY 2024
AGRICULTURE GROUP UPDATE
REPORT BY COUNCILLOR LIZ BULLED

A significant proportion of the area covered by North Devon Council (NDC) is rural and, although not encompassing the majority of the electorate, does comprise of a substantial number of rural businesses who manage the majority of the land area on which many of NDC environmental policies are dependant and on which we will be reliant to deliver the environmental gains expected of us.

It is of concern therefore that there seems to be no effective rural policy upon which to hang the increasing environmental demands and offsets that are require within housing and economic development including carbon offsetting, biodiversity net gain, 30 by 30 expectations, climate mitigation, water issues and many more.

This provides NDC with an opportunity to facilitate actions that promote the opportunities to retain the economic value of such measures within our area and provide a leveraged economic benefit to the rural economy whilst promoting economic development and resilience elsewhere rather than offsetting the gains for potentially to external corporate gain.

Many other authorities have a rural policy which defines an intention to support, in principle, their own rural areas and economies and it is this approach that we would suggest as an initial phase – a statement of recognition of the value of the rural economy, its role in contributing to NDC core objectives and NDC support for it in the current challenging, uncertain, and financially difficult times where government policy is changing at such a speed that rural businesses are struggling to keep up and understand.

Rural North Devon is central to our visitor economy and food production as well as having the means to deliver many of our environmental aspirations – a statement of support would be a good start to engaging fully with them.

We are fortunate to have, among others, a National Park, National Landscapes (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) until last week), and North Devon Biosphere etc as well as wind, solar and biogas operations fully integrated with the farmed rural landscape.

Unfortunately much of this is taken for granted but is probably under greater threat than recognised and stability not helped by the changing policy arena and the plethora of announcements from DEFRA in recent months. The European Union (EU) based Basic payment scheme (BPS) ends in 2024 and is due to be replaced eventually by Environmental land management (ELM) which will optimistically eventually also facilitate private finance opportunities from carbon, water and biodiversity. In the meantime farming and other rural business are likely to suffer financial challenges of significant proportions. The least NDC can do it to signal

recognition of this and implicit support to ensure that North Devon capitalises on all available opportunities.

To do this NDC should engage with rural stakeholders in hopefully March 2024 to ensure we understand the major threats and also talk to the agricultural community at a public meeting about their needs and how NDC will decide what we are legally allowed to do to mitigate the threats. Also ascertain how we can best lobby government to clarify their rural policies highlighting the importance of agricultural production together with the reliance of many rural businesses on what should be a thriving industry and amend them where necessary.