

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 21 FEBRUARY 2024

LEADER'S REPORT

Leaders Report

I am pleased to announce that working with officers we have achieved a balanced budget for the fiscal year 2024/25 without any reduction in services. In fact, we have expanded services by setting aside funding from the current year for Street Marshalls for an additional two years. I want to extend my appreciation to all our staff who have meticulously reviewed each service budget to identify areas where efficiencies can be made.

I have recently met with the Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, Kerry Booth to discuss funding issues faced by councils such as North Devon Council. While I appreciate the extra money allocated to the Rural Services Delivery Grant for North Devon Council, particularly in times of austerity, it is still an unfair allocation of funds compared to urban areas. The Government must reaffirm its commitment to finalising the fair funding review initiated years ago, guaranteeing an equitable distribution of resources. The Rural Services Network reported that due to the Final Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/25, urban residents receive 36% (£141.71) more in government-funded spending power per head compared to rural residents. Additionally, rural residents face, on average, a 20% (£112.33) higher per head council tax burden due to their local councils receiving less government grant. This disparity, compounded by the increased cost of servicing extensive rural areas, underscores the need for fair funding to foster sustainable communities, particularly amidst the current cost of living crisis.

I am very pleased to say that we have now approved to use one of the vacant units in Green Lanes Shopping Centre to use as a Town Centre Hub. The council's strategy and resources committee agreed to fund the infrastructure costs to ready the unit with £220,000 from its Transformation Reserve. It is an opportunity for us to increase our presence in the heart of Barnstaple and make it even easier for our residents and customers to get help and assistance, all while revitalising a vacant unit in Green Lanes Shopping Centre. The hub will enhance our current offering with interactive spaces for customers, desk space for officers from services which have the most regular customer interactions, and meeting rooms for customers discussing sensitive topics.

It is a real positive to be able to potentially share this space with the police and further strengthen our relationship with our local officers as we continue to work in partnership to make Barnstaple and North Devon as a whole a place where people can feel safe and be enjoyed by everyone. I am looking forward to the many benefits this hub will bring to North Devon.

Recent workshops and presentations were delivered to farmers in Holsworthy and Filleigh. Farmers in Northern Devon now have access to valuable guidance to inform

their planning applications, courtesy of a new document released by North Devon and Torridge District Councils.

The Planning Advice for Farmers guidance document is designed to aid those in the agriculture industry in navigating the planning application process. It offers insights into permitted development for farm businesses and advises on when applications are necessary, as well as providing guidance on what constitutes a strong planning application for new farm buildings, slurry storage, and engineering operations. Furthermore, the document offers guidance for farmers seeking to diversify their business ventures, whether through renewable energy projects, building conversions, or tourism development.

Developed in consultation with North Devon Plus, the National Farmers Union, and local farmers from across northern Devon, this guidance serves as a valuable resource. While not formal planning policy, it aims to provide farmers with clear signposts and support as they navigate the planning process.

We have established the North Devon Community Lottery so our local good causes can raise essential funds, so it is amazing to see so many good causes getting on board to raise funds with the lottery, and to see so many people from different charities, groups and organisations at our launch event. We want as many of our hard-working local good causes as possible to benefit from the North Devon Community Lottery and the support of its players when tickets go on sale later this month. It's easy to sign up and is completely free. Please spread the word amongst community organisations and charities.

Starting this month, I am pleased to report that enhancements to public amenities and open spaces along Ilfracombe seafront will commence with the installation of a new play area. Located on the semi-circle of green space near the clapping circle, construction commenced on February 12th. Catering to children up to 12 years old, the equipment has been thoughtfully designed to accommodate various physical and mental needs. Embracing the town's coastal identity, the play area will feature a captivating pirate ship, complementing Ilfracombe's Victorian-era charm with its design and materials.

Pennine Playgrounds Ltd, the appointed contractor, will oversee the project, scheduled for completion by Easter. Importantly, this work will not disrupt any planned seafront events. Fully funded through Section 106 open space funds, totalling £87,000, this initiative aligns with the council's aspirations outlined in the Ilfracombe Seafront masterplan.

Finally, I welcomed local businesses to the NODE Centre to a presentation which gave information about various support services provided by both the council and North Devon Plus. As well as a great networking opportunity the team unveiled our financial plans and grant opportunities for the upcoming year and welcomed input from our local business community.

Councillor Ian Roome
February 2024