

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 20 NOVEMBER 2024

LEADER'S REPORT

I attended the launch, in Ilfracombe, of the Poverty Truth Commission which was both a very well organised and also a very moving experience. It was held in Ilfracombe because, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, the town centre is the most deprived area of Devon – with life expectancy 10 years lower than some other parts of the County. As Ilfracombe is one of the most beautiful parts of the country this is something that is difficult, to some, to understand. We heard some very sad stories – told to us by the actual people who are experiencing poverty on a day to day basis. A common point of view amongst these people was their perception that “ the system” is letting them down with too many organisations – including local councils – failing to work together. There were many positive stories as well but certainly the onus is all of us to work together to help alleviate the terrible consequences that poverty brings to individuals.

It was not a good sign therefore that one of the first acts of the new Labour Government was to abolish the winter fuel allowance for the majority of pensioners. I am pleased that North Devon Council took immediate action to try and help some of these pensioners who will find themselves in real fuel poverty this coming winter. We were pro- active in writing to residents eligible for pension credit but currently not claiming. We will be awarding £200 to all pensionable age households who receive CTR [Council Tax Reduction] who are not in receipt of pension credit and will not, under the new legislation, receive winter fuel payment. Following the motion passed at the last Full Council meeting all 3 party leaders on NDC signed a letter that was sent to the Secretary of State for Local Government, Housing and Communities registering our objections to the new legislation– see attached.

Another worrying aspect of the recent Budget was the implications for the farming community in rural areas like North Devon. In particular small family farms dealing with the inheritance tax implications will cause real problems for food security in the future. I believe there will be a motion coming to Full Council where this topic can be debated.

The housing situation is still a huge concern in North Devon and therefore I welcome the positive news in the recent Government budget. An extra £233 million new funding for homelessness prevention is particularly welcome as Devon County Council has recently dramatically cut their budget in this area. Obviously we shall have to wait to see how much of this new money actually reaches North Devon. It was also good news that Councils will be permanently allowed to retain 100% of receipts locally under the Right to Buy Scheme. I would like to personally thank the Housing Team under Nina Lake and Councillor Graham Bell as Lead Member for all the good work they are doing here in North Devon to try and alleviate the housing problems we have. A new Housing Working Group has been set up which will hopefully be able to make progress with our new Housing Strategy.

I am pleased to report that following a long tender process work has now started on the Barnstaple Town Centre Hub. Hopefully this work should be completed by March 2025 and will be an important OneStop contact for members of the public to access Council services and bring issues to the attention of North Devon Council.

Both Councillor Peter Leaver and myself recently attended a meeting of South Molton Town councillors as part of our effort to visit Parishes and Town Councils of North Devon. It was a useful and interesting meeting and a number of issues were brought to our attention which we are currently chasing up with appropriate officers.

The monthly Budget workshops are now underway and I would encourage any members who have any ideas on where savings in the budget could be made or where they would like to see money spent to attend these meetings and pass these on to Jon Triggs. We will not know the full detailed financial settlement from Government until announcements are made – hopefully by the end of December 2024.

I have also had regular meetings with other District leaders and Team Devon – that involves the County Leadership Team. Councillor Pete Leaver and myself have also met with Torridge Leaders in an effort to foster good working relationships between the two councils. At the time of writing we are due to have the first Joint Local Plan Visioning Workshop at Caddisdown. This will be important as it will set the direction of the new Local Plan. Hopefully I will be able to give an update at the Full Council.

As far as Devolution is concerned the formation of the CCA is ongoing with the necessary regulations expected to be laid at the end of November and coming into force early in the New Year. District Leaders will shortly meet to decide who will represent District Councils on the Board [2 seats] and the Constitution and other governance arrangements are being finalised. However... the Government has given a clear steer via various speeches and policy documents that its preferred devolution model is based on a wider geographical area and also an elected mayoral arrangement. The upcoming English Devolution White Paper will set out more details on future devolution. This White Paper is due to be released soon and we will have to examine this in detail to see the implications for District and County.

Our ref:

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Date: 12 November 2024



The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Angela Rayner MP

Winter Fuel Payment

I am writing on behalf of North Devon Council.

At a recent meeting of the Council, Councillors debated a notice of motion in relation to the Winter Fuel Payments.

Councillors noted the recent announcement by the new Labour Government to end universal winter fuel payments and restrict eligibility to only those in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits. Councillors thanked our MP for North Devon, and other MPs, for the work they have done in Parliament in highlighting many peoples shared concerns regarding this decision.

Though many agree that universal Winter Fuel Payments have been poorly administered in the past, Councillors were deeply concerned that many pensioners on lower and middle incomes as well as working pensioners will now not receive the payments and have had inadequate time to budget for this loss in the coming months. Across England and Wales the number of people eligible for winter fuel payments will fall by 10 million (from 11.4 million to 1.5 million).

In addition Councillors also noted that the Energy Price Cap is due to rise by 10% in October, which combined by the removal of Winter Fuel Payments will push many local pensioners further into fuel poverty. As well as the hardship on local pensioners, this will create an additional burden on healthcare services over the winter months due to many more pensioners struggling to meet the increased cost of eating and heating.

In North Devon the number of pensioners is around 22,000 (23% of our population). After the cut, only around 2,400 pensioners will continue to receive the allowance.

North Devon Council believes that the Government has set the threshold at which pensioners do not qualify for Winter Fuel Payments far too low. Only those receiving a pension of less than £218.15 a week (or £332.95 a week for couples) are eligible for pension credits. This is significantly lower than the living wage rate. It also means that pensioners who continue to work through necessity to top up their pension, will be losing out because of their continued hard work. If the winter fuel payment cut goes ahead then a more sensible metric is required to allow the government to more precisely ensure that fuel allowance is paid to everyone who requires it.

Rural pensioners often live in older, less energy-efficient housing, with over 70% of rural homes in the UK built before 1980. These homes are typically harder and more expensive to heat due to poor insulation and outdated heating systems.

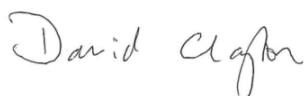
In addition, there is also concern by the low take up of pension credit with only 63% of those eligible nationwide receiving them – this equates to over 1,000 North Devon pensioners. North Devon Council recognises the role we have to play to increase awareness of benefits such as Pension Credit and also the Household Support Scheme to ensure people are aware of the support they are entitled to.

North Devon Council will continue its significant awareness campaign through all available media to maximise uptake of pension credits and the availability of the Household Support Fund. The Council is also considering how the Household Support Fund can be used to help pensioners who fall just outside of pension credit.


Council resolved that a letter be sent to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Housing, Community and Local Government calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be immediately paused and introduce a new threshold to determine eligibility for Winter Fuel Payments.

I welcome your views.

Yours sincerely



**Councillor David Clayton
Leader of the Council**



**Councillor Malcolm Prowse
Leader of the Independent Group**



**Councillor Paul Crabb
Leader of the Conservative Group**

cc. The Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer