

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 15 JANUARY 2025

REPORT OF THE LEAD MEMBER FOR REGENERATION, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

I regard myself as being very lucky to have held this portfolio across the last 6 years – leading on issues such as regeneration of our communities and the wellbeing of the local economy. These issues are very important to me, and I think to all the folk of North Devon. Having said that, the next couple of years look like being the most challenging we have ever faced – the new national planning regime, so called devolution and what feels like another bout of austerity will challenge us all! I will lay out what I see as a balance of the challenges coming our way - whilst outlining our many achievements and successes.

Regeneration:

Everyone I meet comment on the fantastic renewal of the Barnstaple Pannier Market. The building, inside and outside, was certainly looking its best over Christmas, and I often boast it contains the best public loos in Devon! We now are looking forward to the scaffolding coming down soon at 36 Boutport Street showing off one of the finest listed buildings in town and on its way back to its former glory – saved and brought back to life by this Council. The new year will see works move on a pace on the new-build element on the site of no 37. It is important to put on record our thanks to Pearce Construction – a local firm who have shown all the skills needed to restore the old buildings and build the new. I am also grateful to Penny Evans (Tom Evan's sister) who called me in 2019 after Tom's sad death to ensure that his dream of renewal would be achieved by offering first refusal to North Devon Council to buy 36 and 37 Boutport Street. Tom would be so chuffed.

The new Central Car Park works are progressing well and are on course to provide a new easy and high-profile access from the relief road. This enhanced facility will be a boon for the town centre users and especially helpful for visitors to Barnstaple. Well positioned and reasonably priced car parking is key to the vitality of the town centre and its businesses.

By April of this year Green Lanes will have contributed over a million pounds net 'profit' to the NDC coffers. But equally important as this – the vision of the Council to invest underlines the confidence shown in the town's future and has re-enforced the important role of the regional centre leading to additional private investment.

The new Seven Brethren Car Park is complete and with the enabling works undertaken for the housing site, the redevelopment of the riverbank promises to be exciting to observe over the next years, 180 new homes of which 54 will be affordable and in a sustainable location.

On the other side of town new life is being breathed into the old Lace Factory site including another raft of affordable housing for local people.

Our Street Marshall scheme funding was extended to carry on in both Barnstaple and Ilfracombe, it has been very well received and has become an exemplar for other communities to follow.

The renewal works enhancing Ilfracombe seafront continue with the new play equipment now delivered and the contractors on site to build the new loos and kiosks. A top priority for this authority is to make a high-profile intervention in Ilfracombe highlighting how older buildings can be re-used to deliver high quality living accommodation. Let's hope that the initial allocation of funding will just be the first step in a longer-term renewal programme in the town.

The additional works undertaken to link the adjacent limekiln area to the new Watersports Centre have proved popular with locals and visitors alike, and the whole project continues to win award after award! Well done to the team.

Culture:

The importance of culture in regeneration is often under-rated but the coming 2 years will show what a difference investing in it can make. Our £3m successful bid will have an impact across North Devon but particularly so in Barnstaple and Ilfracombe – we now have Culture Boards set up in each town to carry on the work. The capital scheme for modernising a large part of Bridge Buildings are out to tender, bringing the stunning old Court Room (that overlooks the Strand), back to active life again will be the highlight.

New signage across Barnstaple will be in place during the Spring as part of a way finding strategy showing off everything the ancient borough has to offer. The Culture Team have also helped re-invent the famous Barnstaple carnival and promoted a super calendar of events in the Pannier Market, especially at Christmas. The Culture Bid funding will also help implement the new arts element to be housed at the Boutport Street site and put the final touches to the project.

Wider Economy:

Just before Christmas we received the news that the next round of funding for the UK Shared Prosperity Funding will be allocated to the CCA (the new Devon & Torbay quango). This is very disappointing news as previously we really benefited from local control and decision making from previous allocations. Together with North Devon+ we have been able to make a positive difference by delivering business grants, town centre enhancement grants and helping farmers and businesses with the raft of changes facing agriculture. It is vital we lobby to ensure that this latest allocation of funding is devolved to where it can be most effectively used – that is here in North Devon!

The new joint Economic Strategy was well drafted and clear statement of how Northern Devon can improve the wages and skills levels in the local economy, by concentrating on nurturing new industries and supporting the many existing successful business clusters. This strategy has been formally adopted by both North Devon and Torridge Councils and endorsed by North Devon Futures and North Devon+. A super piece of work.

Strategic Planning:

Here comes the more challenging part! The new NPPF (National Planning Framework) was published on 12th December. To my amazement the annual housing target for North Devon and Torridge was increased from the already almost impossible one set in the draft just after the General Election. To put this in context, the target figure went from 720 to 1329 new house builds per year - and I believe the highest figure we have ever delivered (in the best housing boom year) was just over 800.

The Joint Planning Policy Committee meets on the 24th January and will receive a report on the implications of the new NPPF – including the policies affecting new local plans as well as the delivery of these eye watering housing figures. Clearly, there will be some very important decisions to be made in the next year or two, this may be our last opportunity to collaborate and own a truly local plan for northern Devon. We will have to produce an updated timetable for the new Local Plan by March 2025 to meet the Government's target dates, although we do still have a 5-year housing land supply which we were able to confirm in early December 2024.

Finally, I would like to say how very fortunate I am to work with such an incredible team of officers within North Devon Council, and I would like to put on record my thanks for their support to me in this role. The work carried out by this conscientious group has made the job a pleasure and shows what District Councils can achieve!

Malcolm Prowse

3rd January 2025