

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 26 FEBRUARY 2025

LEADER'S REPORT

A lot of time has been spent on trying to make sense and produce agreement amongst the different Councils on where we are going with the Government's Devolution agenda. The devolution agenda involves the passing of powers currently exercised by central government down to a local area. The government aim is to have elected mayoral arrangements, similar to Greater Manchester, across the whole country and the new powers would then vest with the Mayor and with new Strategic Authorities. The Strategic Authorities would cover populations of around 1.5m people and would cover areas that have common economies and communities etc. The powers that will be given to the new Mayors and Strategic Authorities will cover issues such as strategic economic regeneration, strategic transport, adult skills and much more. In the main, these would be powers that are currently exercised by government and not by any current layer of local government. The intention would also be to provide Mayors with an integrated funding settlement and it would then be for the Mayor and the Strategic Authority to decide how that funding should be spent. There was general agreement across the Devon Councils that, while not necessarily agreeing with the idea of Elected Mayors, that this is going to happen and the area would be Devon and Cornwall. Unfortunately Cornwall does not want to take part and believes it should go alone. This will have to be resolved by the Government.

Underneath the Strategic Authority will be Unitary systems of government / administration and we have been asked to come up with proposals as to how this might look. The whole timetable of this is rushed and betrays a complete lack of planning on behalf of Government. The letter from Government, continually delayed, eventually arrived and has asked for expressions of interest by 21st March and full proposals by 28th November. Here in North Devon we set up a small working group of Councillors from the 3 political groups and this was due to meet again on Friday 14th February. I am due to have a couple of meetings with District Leaders and Officers in the week beginning 17th February. Hopefully I will be able to give some clearer update at Full Council.

I would like to say Thank you to all those Councillors and Officers who took part in the recent Peer Review Governance Light Touch Review. I appreciate that some Councillors couldn't attend due to work commitments. We are still waiting for the written report to come through but we did have a verbal feedback session which was very positive. They appreciated the sense of collegiate working that they found throughout the Council and were impressed with the working of the Policy Committee on their work – particularly in their sub group work looking into areas such as Agriculture/farming, water and dentistry. They did say that they felt we could look again at how internal scrutiny works at North Devon Council and commented on duplication of reports going to different committees as well as the size of the committees. As soon as we receive the written report we will share this with all members and take action on any recommendations that they put forward. Unfortunately members of the Peer Review Team from other authorities are from

Councils that are being fast tracked in the Devolution Programme and so we will have to postpone the full Peer Review that was due to take place in March. We will let Members know as soon as the new dates are arranged.

It was great to see that the scaffolding at 36 Boutport Street, Barnstaple has finally been removed and I would recommend that Members take a look at the work that has been done. This is an historic building and the renovation has carefully kept to the initial intention and detail of the original design. Internal work is ongoing and the aim for the new building next to the restored number 36 is to provide flexible working and living spaces to encourage a creative business to take root in this part of the larger Market Quarter Barnstaple project.

Councillor Pete Leaver and myself are continuing to attend Parish Council meeting across North Devon and were due to attend Swimbridge Parish Council on the 13th February. These are a way of keeping Parishes informed of recent developments and also to listen to any concerns they may have. Councillor Leaver also attended the recent Parish Forum which specifically addressed the Devolution agenda.

The Council is inviting people to have their say on the new draft housing strategy, which sets out a high-level vision and objectives as to how the council plans to meet the housing needs and hopes of our communities. The draft strategy has been prepared in full consultation with a working group of councillors, who have been involved through a dedicated workshop and feedback sessions. It is built on a foundation of three themes:

- **Preventing homelessness:** Preventing homelessness by supporting citizens to stay in their current home if they have one, but if this isn't possible or they are already homeless seek to help them find alternative solutions.
- **Providing new housing supply:** Supply new housing to meet social demand, delivering affordable and sustainable healthy homes wherever possible.
- **Making homes healthy:** Improving the quality of existing homes making them safe and healthy, in turn making their occupants healthy too.

Thanks to all involved.

Obviously at this Full Council we will be setting the budget for the next 12 months and so I wont comment on that in detail here but a balanced budget will be presented to all members and I would like to take this opportunity to say a big thank you to Jon Triggs and his team for all the work that has been put in.

Councillor David Clayton
Leader of North Devon Council