

## **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 22 JULY 2020**

### **LEADER'S REPORT**

It seems an age since the last Full Council meeting and so much has happened as the Council has reacted to the complex challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic. We live in unprecedented times. To begin with Malcolm Prowse and I were attending daily Senior Management Team meetings in order to keep up updated with reports from government or agency virtual meetings and any new information which was coming out each day.

These meetings have gradually been reduced recently as the operational side of the council was put in place to facilitate the new circumstances we are now working within. The Council developed a process for redeploying staff from across the organisation into critical frontline services in order to improve resilience. Examples include personnel being redeployed into customer services, the finance team and waste and recycling team to maintain our front line services. This has proved effective with, for example, the waste and recycling team and those issuing business grants having received many plaudits from the public. Although many services have continued of necessity to operate from BEC and Lynton House, 260 staff have been working from home thanks to the hard work of the ICT team and only a small number of staff were furloughed where services were stopped altogether such as car parks, museum and the pannier market.

When lockdown was announced we changed the way we provide services moving away from face to face customer contact to appointment only (and only in emergencies). The most notable changes have been to customer contact services, with the majority of services now being provided by telephone, video conferencing and via the Council website. Our Communications team have been very active in updating our Covid 19 advice on our website and social media and in issuing press statements. The local and national press have been very interested in what is happening in North Devon with many senior management members, councillors including myself being interviewed on a regular basis.

The Head of Resources and the finance team have been extremely busy paying out grants to small businesses in North Devon. We have now paid out around £42 million to 3700 businesses in grants. The finance team are continuing to pro-actively make direct contact with the eligible businesses who have not yet applied (at the time of writing about 200) to direct them onto the website to submit a form. The separate discretionary grant scheme is being administered by our Economic Development team (total fund of £2.3million available) and went live early June; to date the council have awarded 214 grants worth £1.3million from this fund. We worked with the other District Councils in Devon to draw up the criteria for administering these grants which are designed primarily to help those businesses who missed out on the original grant scheme. Hopefully these grants will help many of our small businesses survive. Alongside paying

out grants, the Revenues and Benefits team provided business rates relief through the expanded retail hospitality and leisure discount which saw £20.5million relief going to 1,174 businesses. These businesses were all re-billed with no business rates to pay for 2020-21 year.

We have endeavoured to support the most vulnerable in North Devon by coordinating the community hub on our website, financially supporting the North Devon Foodbanks, delivering food parcels (carried out mainly by our car park wardens who volunteered to do this task), phoning and making contact with everyone in North Devon on the government's 'shielded' list (those with specific medical conditions which put them most at risk) and with others who contacted the Council to request help. For example, we have worked with other organisations such as the County Council, One Northern Devon and Encompass to provide help where needed. Councillors provided part of their community grants to help organisations involved in helping the most vulnerable and the Council Tax Hardship Fund awarded £560,000 to 3,715 council tax payers to provide an additional £150 reduction off council tax bills for those in receipt of council tax support.

Throughout the Council has continued to meet its statutory requirements with regards to homelessness and the provision of emergency housing support. The Housing and Homelessness teams maintained a presence in Lynton House throughout to provide this service, with the virus leading to increased numbers of people requiring emergency accommodation. The demand continues to increase as more people find themselves without sufficient income to pay for their current accommodation and while others struggle with relationship stresses not helped by the coronavirus lockdown. This is going to be a financial challenge for the council as we try to accommodate those who would otherwise be on the streets.

Throughout the pandemic we have been having a large number of meetings with government ministers, the District Council Network, Devon Team (District Council leaders and the County Council), the HotSW, the LEP and the Greater South West Council leaders, the Local Resilience Forum and the M.P. etc. Through these meetings we have been able to raise our concerns about the tourist industry and influx of tourists, the progress of Brexit negotiations, the viability of leisure centres and our theatres, the often confusing government messages and guidelines etc. Our Chief Executive has been taking a leading role in areas such as the problem of homelessness at the Devon meetings and nationally and in the Great South West regarding leisure facilities. As leader I have written to our M.P. about the concern over leaving the EU without a trade agreement and to Robert Jenrick regarding the need for new builds to incorporate technologies to help prevent global warming. I have also spoken direct to Simon Clarke regarding the challenges facing the economy of North Devon and our concerns about the financial needs of this council. Indeed we along with other council leaders have raised the issue of council finances at every opportunity. By the end of July we estimated that NDC will have lost £3,129,556 in income and forecast additional costs of £591,660 because of Covid 19. The government has given us £1,018,008 leaving us with a shortfall of around £2,703,208. The latest round of promises from the government

will assist towards filling this gap but exactly how much we will receive has not been confirmed at the time of writing and will still leave us with a considerable hole in our budget moving forwards. It is likely, therefore, that we will need to produce a short and medium term new budget in the autumn.

We have re-introduced charging in all NDC car parks, and initially we did so with no cash payment facilities to reduce the spread of Covid. We promoted the RingGo service heavily, absorbing the 20p charge previously paid for by customers and took away the £3.30 minimum payment for card payments so debit or credit cards could be used for shorter stays where we have card-enabled machines. It's fair to say we had a few teething problems going cashless and we needed to reverse that decision but we are exploring some other ways people who really struggle to go cashless may do so more easily in the future. At the same time we want to review our whole charging system.

With all the challenges, responsibilities and extra meetings it has inevitably disrupted our programme of transforming the council and moving forward with our corporate plan. As was stated at the recent briefing concerning the draft copy of the peer review we now need to review where we are and assess the implications of where we aspire to be. So the Head of Place has been working with partners on a recovery plan with a theme of stronger, fairer and greener. Incorporated within this is a vision of where we wish to be by 2030. This proposal should be thoroughly examined not only by the Council but also by North Devon Futures, North Devon Plus and other partners and we need to find capacity to implement what we agree. It will give us the opportunity of re-examining our corporate priorities, consulting the public and probably redesigning our staffing structure to ensure we have the capacity to deliver on the above.

Already we have submitted to the LEP a number of projects which we hope will be successful in attracting additional funding. These include the Watersports Centre at Ilfracombe, Westacott HIF, Ilfracombe HIF, EA Flood Management, Barnstaple plus new projects such as Ilfracombe Urban Renewal, Digital Biosphere, Smarter Carbon, New Road and Cycle Link to Larkbear. In addition at the end of the month we will be submitting to government our bid for the High Street Fund for Barnstaple.

Now that we are in the recovery stage we are consulting with those who have been working from home during the pandemic to ascertain whether this will become the norm or whether returning to the office full or part time offers the best way forwards. Thanks are due to the staff who have coped with the change in circumstances and to those who have put the necessary safety measures in place for those who will be returning to our offices. At some point we will need to consider whether we continue with all our council meetings via Teams or when it is safe to do so, have some of them face to face. The customer services and IT teams have made what twelve months ago may have been seen as impracticable become a reality.

As you will be aware there were some issues with people flocking to the beach during the glorious weather of the bank holiday. This caused problems because many facilities

were not open. Our Lead Member for coastal communities chaired a webinar with our officers and many tourist businesses to find out the issues they are particularly concerned about in our hospitality industry. Now with most of the facilities open again we can expect a continual influx of tourists for the next few months. With the pubs and restaurants and other facilities being reopened there is always the fear that we could have a spike in infections of Covid 19. Consequently I have asked Phil Norrey and the County Council to put on a webinar so members are aware of the steps which are planned to be taken if this does occur. We have been fortunate in having had a relatively low number of cases but we have many senior and vulnerable citizens so it is important to take as many safety precautions as possible.

Finally I would like to put on record that I have seen how incredibly hard the senior management team has been working and I would like to thank them and indeed all our staff on behalf of all of us on ensuring that we have continued to provide services throughout these challenging times.

David Worden

11<sup>th</sup> July 2020