

## **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 7 OCTOBER 2020**

### **LEADER'S REPORT**

Since the last Full Council meeting there has been a considerable amount happening at North Devon Council. This has included the Council overseeing the giving out of millions of pounds to local businesses. Staff worked tirelessly to trace those who were entitled to receive the government grants and by delivering over 95% of the allocated funds it has provided an important boost to the North Devon economy. Overall, the Council paid out over £45million in business grants and £20million in business rate expanded retail reliefs. Steps were also put in place as North Devon gradually opened up to tourists and measures were taken to help shops and businesses to reopen. We also set out our vision for 2030 and identified themes and actions in order to provide a framework for recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic. Whilst further outbreaks appear likely to occur we have been considering how we maintain resilience of critical services and plan for longer term recovery. This isn't easy particularly because of the loss of income and extra expense because of the coronavirus crisis. However, this is particularly important as Devon County Council has predicted that six out of the top ten District wards in Devon that will be worse affected economically by the pandemic are here in North Devon.

Despite this it is worth repeating that our ambition is to ensure that North Devon remains a highly desirable place where people are able to live well, work productively, move freely and benefit from excellent education, health, leisure and cultural facilities in harmony with nature and our world-class environment. Our Recovery Strategy focuses on building and supporting: A sustainable, inclusive economy, a net zero carbon society, promoting biodiversity gain and environmental improvement, and the health and wellbeing of our communities.

The plan is a working document and will continue to evolve as circumstances change. It will involve changes to the governance of the Council to reflect new priorities and react to the new 'norm'. The plan commits the council to aspire to become carbon neutral as soon as possible before 2030 and to use its powers and influence to protect and improve the environment, while encouraging and supporting others to do the same. A temporary post of Environment/Climate Change Officer is to be created to support the development and delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan. We are also working with other partners such as the county council supporting Solar Together. With group buying experts iChoosr Ltd, they are offering homeowners the chance to buy high quality solar PV more cheaply than if they were buying alone.

We are hoping to install Electric Charging Points in Council Car Parks. Currently 19 car parks have been approved for future electric vehicle point solutions. They include car parks in Barnstaple, Ilfracombe, South Molton, Lynton, Motehoe, Bickington, Fremington and Croyde. The first award has been made from the Climate and Environment Grant Fund of £10,000 to East Anstey Parish Council for their project to make Anstey Village Hall environmental and sustainable. This grant will be helping towards the cost of installing solar panels to help the hall become more energy efficient and help eliminate climate change. The consequence of climate change was highlighted by the flooding in North Devon on 17th August 2020 and we have been gathering information particularly in Barnstaple to help us understand the source and cause of the flooding.

I am pleased to report that the Waste and Recycling Team at North Devon Council has received the Environment Cup from Barnstaple's town mayor in recognition of their efforts with the community's environment. Councillor Alan Rennles, and myself visited some of the team at BEC before the recycling crew went out on their rounds to present the award. The award is presented by the mayor to a person or group in the community which they feel deserves recognition for their efforts. The whole team, all the waste and recycling crews, office and workshop staff were praised for their commitment and efforts over the year, particularly during the Covid-19 outbreak.

You will be aware that a small number of the office staff have returned to work at Lynton House or Brynsworthy but many are still working from home or doing a combination of the two. A lot of work has been done to ensure that those who return are kept as safe as possible from Covid 19. We are currently reviewing the officer structure of the council to see if there are areas we can make changes to increase our capacity. This was a need highlighted in the Peer Review and we need to look beyond just our operational services, revisit our corporate priorities and improve our ability to draw up readymade projects to bid for government funds when they become available. We also need to look at the capacity of some of our departments which appear very stretched at the moment.

One concern is around testing for Covid 19 and the apparent lack of capacity compared to demand. We have had cases over the past 6 months when staff members, or their close family, have had symptoms. We have been fortunate enough to arrange tests for those individuals and anyone else coming into close contact with them, and thankfully those results have been negative and returned within a day or two. This has enabled the individuals concerned to have their minds put at ease but has also helped the organisation as those colleagues have been able to return to work very quickly. However, with the current capacity issues in the testing system, tests will not be available for anyone who is not displaying symptoms and seem to be much harder to get hold of even for those that are. This could prove to be very serious if we are hit with

the level of outbreak of the coronavirus that is particularly affecting some parts of the country at the moment.

It is pleasing to remind members that NDC's website has once again been judged as being the best local authority website in the country in the quarterly national audit by independent specialists Sitemorse. The website underwent hundreds of tests, checks and measures which identify actions that improve the user experience, looking at factors such as loading speed, links and accessibility. Well done to the ICT department once again.

It is also good to report that homeless people in North Devon who were housed during the COVID-19 pandemic will be helped to stay in accommodation this year, thanks to an allocation of government funding. North Devon Council will receive a £59,000 share of £91.5million that was allocated nationally to ensure interim accommodation and support for vulnerable homeless people. The funding will be used to help people into the private rented housing sector, to secure interim accommodation such as supported housing and to assess the wider support needed to help them rebuild their lives.

In addition our Community Housing Fund is helping four parishes progress community-led housing schemes in North Devon. This could enable the completion of up to 57 affordable homes for local people in the parishes of Parracombe, Morteohoe, Lynton and Lynmouth and Georgeham.

The Government has recently published its plans to overhaul the planning system. It proposes a radical root and branch reform of the planning system as a whole; from reframing the ethos of the system through fundamental reform of plan-making and significant change to development management. Full details of the Government's proposals are set out in a consultation document '*Planning for the Future*' that can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>. The consultation is open now and runs until the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2020. The White Paper could have significant consequences for our area and the influence and control that we would have over development so thank you for those who attended the members briefing on September 30<sup>th</sup>.

Another White Paper is due to be published in October and will be focussed on local government re-organisation. This may have potential repercussions for us in North Devon but is too early to say and we will keep a very close eye on this and keep both staff and members updated. We are already working closely with other District Councils, for example, we have been working in partnership with local authorities across the South West in urgently calling on the government to provide funding to safeguard the future of leisure centres. We are asking ministers to approve a funding submission to help local authorities meet the costs of the reopening and operating leisure centres across the country caused by the lockdown and ongoing impact of Covid-19. It is good

that work has started on North Devon's new leisure centre but Parkwood are still asking us to help subsidise them each month because of their ongoing loss of income.

We are still waiting to hear whether the funding for the Ilfracombe Watersports Centre will be finally approved but things are looking hopeful. We are also waiting for the decision on our Future High Streets bid which is due this autumn. If approved, this would provide a significant capital investment into Barnstaple and would enable us to move forward with plans to re-invigorate our High Street by improving the areas around the Pannier Market and Butchers Row. We had a useful joint briefing with Barnstaple Town Councillors on 23rd September and it was suggested that we set up a joint working group to discuss further many good ideas which were forthcoming. Councillors received a presentation by Martyn Lonsdale, Lavigne Lonsdale regarding the Vision and Pannier Market. The Economic Development team then gave a presentation regarding the Future High Streets bid and the next steps.

We live in difficult times but so far the staff have risen to the challenges and new norm and the Council has coped remarkably well. We are fortunate in having such a dedicated team of staff and councillors who have been willing to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances.

David Worden

28<sup>th</sup> September 2020

PS Torridge District Council members are discussing the following motion at their Full Council on October 5<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately we weren't made aware of it before the deadline for submitting our motions for debate. Nevertheless I would like the backing of the council for us to support this motion and would suggest that the leaders of the four groups sign a joint letter to Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust.

"Pregnancy and birth is hard at the best of times. Covid-19 has made this even harder by removing partner support for women at the most exciting but also nerve-wracking time of their lives.

Since the national lockdown was lifted, maternity restrictions have remained and pregnant women have continued to sit alone in hospital rooms with partners locked out of scans and labour. They are anxiously separated from the people they love the most, with no idea of the outcomes as women are given life-changing news; they miss that first special moment of seeing their baby's first heartbeat, or are devastatingly absent and unable to hold the mother's hand through the tears and heartache of finding out it's not there.

On 8th Sept the government gave NHS Trusts guidance that states women should be permitted to have a supportive person with them for all scans and during all stages of labour. Yet at North Devon District Hospital the rules remain the same and no changes have been made to reflect this guidance.

Pregnancy, with all its ups and downs, is not something that should be experienced alone.

As such, I propose that this council writes a letter to Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust asking them to reconsider their current maternity restrictions with urgency, and

allow women to have their partners with them for all pregnancy scans and at all stages of labour.”