

County Councillor's Annual Report 19th April – Coffinswell

At the start of the year, I was re-elected and made Chair of Scrutiny and Chair of the Corporate, Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee at our County Council.

The first year of the new Council has seen Scrutiny focus upon supporting new and returning Members to understand the Council. This is reflected in the unusually high number of masterclasses. After this focus all Committees have now moved to undertake task group investigations and spotlight reviews.

CIRS Scrutiny has continued to have a Standing Overview Group on Climate Change and established a spotlight review on Loneliness as well as completing work on the highways Milestone contract.

Fourteen thousand randomly selected Devon households were invited to enter a 'civic lottery' to determine who represented the county at last summer's Devon Climate Assembly.

It followed the public consultation on the Interim Devon Carbon Plan, the county's climate roadmap which outlines what every resident, business and organisation will have to do to reduce carbon emissions. The Interim Carbon Plan was developed by the Devon Climate Emergency Response Group (DCERG) – a partnership of Devon's councils, emergency services, voluntary organisations, and business groups.

Last week the administration agreed with the Assembly, after the final consultation of the Assembly's proposals, that wind farms, where sited appropriately to minimise effects on communities and the environment, can be part of providing Devon's energy needs and that the benefits of new energy infrastructure should be retained locally wherever possible. They also agreed that Devon needs better active and public transport infrastructure, and that it should be more affordable and convenient, alongside providing confidence to drivers to switch to electric vehicles. Additionally, much more must be done to support people to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes and businesses.

Earlier this year Council leaders welcomed Government backing for a Devon, Plymouth and Torbay County Deal aimed at delivering on key economic and social priorities for the area. The announcement by Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove commits the Government to working with a strong partnership of councils as part of the Government's levelling up policy.

The devolution bid was based on the strong foundation of the councils in Devon working well and closely together, as they have for many years, but especially so throughout the pandemic. A new purpose and unity has, without doubt, been forged.

I am cautious about the Combined Mayoral Authority model, believing it can lead to a situation where the districts are marginalised and decisions are taken very much more remotely from the communities they affect.

Devon is hugely short-changed by Government - you need only look at the loss of money from the rate support grant, the massive budget hole for special educational needs in Devon and so much more. For some, the devolution deal will be headlined as more money for Devon.... the reality is that we'll get back some of what has been taken.

In short, Devon is likely to find it has lost a fiver and found sixpence!

However, we must be pragmatic and seize the opportunities that are available - and if we can get the additional resources we need to deliver more and better jobs, the affordable housing that is so essential and boost Devon's reputation as a place to do business, then we shouldn't stand on the sidelines - but grasp what is available, work with Government and continue together to lobby for Devon.

Much of my reports to this Council have been taken up with the response to the Pandemic – they chart the course of the government’s response and how we interpreted that response here in Devon. The crisis has generated an amazing response from all levels of local government in Devon under the Team Devon banner. Clearly the Devon response has been exemplary with some of the lowest rates in the UK. Other notable achievements have been our response to the PPE crisis and our low level of infections in Care Homes.

Finally, Devon County Council approved its lowest council tax rise for seven years – this is because councils are only allowed to increase their budget by 2.99%. In previous years they have been able to increase by up to 3% on top of this for social care- however that was spread over three years but could be used in one go – and so they did.

It means council taxpayers in Devon were asked for £1,556.46 for a Band D property to help fund vital services for the most vulnerable children and adults and our highway network on 1st April.

There will be spending increases of over 10 per cent on both children’s services and adult services and health to keep up with a rocketing rise in demand. These increases mask some worrying figures – staffing levels in the Adult and children’s services will rise by 498 to 3, 101. However, we will be spending not quite £1 million extra on these staff to tell people that we are cutting £3.5 million in care and support for older people, £3 million in support for people with learning difficulties and £1.4 million to support people to live independently at home.

When it comes to Highways we are cutting £250k from retaining walls and bridges, £700k from safety work, £120k from network management, £300k from drainage maintenance and £100 from cyclic cleaning (gullies) – this is on top of inflation pressures of £1.56 million. Something I feel terrible about - we are planning to increase waste to landfill by 4,750 tonnes and reducing our recycled waste by 10,000 tonnes at a time when we should be decreasing the former and upping the latter.

Finally, we are cutting £120k from our Locality budgets, £462k for grant funding to communities and £329k for community grants. I guess the one bright spot is that our Libraries are planning to purchase 200,000 children’s books

The Council will take £22.9 million from emergency reserves and there will be cuts of £30 million. This is all without the Children’s High Needs Block budget which is expected to reach a staggering deficit of £110 million by the end of next year. All in all, a disaster for our County – it did not have to be this way.

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