

Holsworthy Rural – County Councillor ‘Update’ (January 2021)

Hello Everyone! A belated “Happy New Year to one and all!”

If I haven’t yet got around to seeing you ‘remotely’ or speaking with you I hope that you have had a good Christmas and that things, certainly, take a turn for the better for us all in 2021. These are truly unprecedented times, and along with expressing our great sadness for those who have lost loved ones or are currently suffering at the expense of the pandemic within our communities I would also like to express thanks to the determination and selfless acts of local volunteers alongside those involved in care provision more formally.

At this time of the year, and with the cost of the pandemic (financially, and otherwise) uppermost in the minds of many I want to focus this ‘Update’ on matters very much related to the business side of things and to give a sense of where we all stand regarding this year’s County Council Budget. Detail below includes information given to me in preparation for Budget decision-making.

Last month the Government published the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2021/22. Excluding Government assumptions about council tax nationally, the **increase in Government funding for the Council is £3.7m or 2.2%**. This includes:

- An additional £3.1m from a new Social Care grant of £300m nationally. This is to support both Children’s and Adults Social Care;
- An increase in Devon’s allocation of Rural Services Delivery Grant of £368,000;
- A reduction in New Home Bonus Grant of £957,000;

For Council Tax, the Government has announced that:

- The **Council Tax** increase that will trigger the need for a referendum is 2%;
- Local authorities can also set an **Adult Social Care Precept of up to 3%**. If the full percentage is not used in 2021/22 there is an option to carry forward the unused amount to 2022/23;
- A grant of £670m nationally has been announced to offset some of the **impact the Pandemic** is having on the Council Tax Base for next year. **Devon’s share is £6.358m;**
- A Council Tax Income Guarantee Scheme has been announced that will compensate authorities for 75% of irrecoverable losses in the current year.

The Government has also announced:

- Devon’s share of **National COVID Funding** for 2021/22 is **£14.823m**.
- The Fairer Funding Review, 75% Business Rate Retention and the Business Rates Reset have been delayed.

- A **public sector pay freeze** has been announced, except for those earning less than £24,000 per annum who will receive an increase of at least £250. The pay freeze **does not apply to front-line NHS staff**; and
- The **National Living Wage will increase by 2.2%** next year to £8.91 per hour (each additional 1% costs the council around £1.5m).

Whilst, councils are in receipt of governmental support for the pandemic its financial impact is expected to result in reduced council tax collection rates and increased numbers of claimants for council tax support.

Learning disability services (including autism) have seen **significant growth** in activity over recent years and continue to be under pressure going forward, particularly as children in care transition to adulthood. **Devon has an above average elderly population** too, when compared nationally, which is forecast to continue increasing and therefore could risk additional pressure on services.

In the autumn of 2020, the Government announced that the **National Living Wage (NLW) will increase by 2.2%** in April. NLW is the principal driver of price inflation in the care markets because it impacts directly on the price of labour. In Devon, NLW is now estimated to add £2.6m to the cost of adult social care packages in 2021/22. Care workers are predominantly women.

In Children's Social Care some of the greatest pressures come from an increase in referrals and a **rising number of children in care**. In part this is driven by the impact of the pandemic on families and children, including those with disabilities. Across the service £6m has been provided in the budget to meet growth in demand in addition to £0.7 million for inflationary pressures.

The budget provides for an additional investment of £1.6m in social work staff for improvement and demand response. £1.8m of infrastructure, running costs and other efficiency savings are planned along with a re-alignment of resources for disabled children to ensure families receive the right support at the right time.

Within Public Health Nursing infrastructure and running cost savings of £0.7m are planned.

In terms of overall social/equality impacts, increases will benefit older and younger people, carers (who are predominantly women) and disabled people.

Running up to the end of 2020 Devon has some of the lowest numbers of cases with COVID-19, so may not experience significant direct effects of the illness. Economically, the impact appears to be more severe than many other places in England, especially coastal and rural areas like ours more dependent on hospitality. Some communities are affluent and more resilient, though it is the lowest paid who have seen the largest percentage furloughed or who have lost their job.

In a world increasingly connected digitally, digital isolation presents barriers to accessing employment, services, and training. The inability to work remotely became a key barrier during lock-down. This is especially so, too, for our children and their ability to work remotely regarding home-schooling. Those who cannot readily access digital services or skills may find themselves disadvantaged during recovery in accessing employment, especially if home or remote working becomes the norm.

Digital working has increased during lock-down, and will most likely continue, whilst the decline in investment in the high street and offices has also accelerated. Conversely, those who could access digital media suggested there was an overload of information about services and support (Healthwatch, 2020), something which I have been keen to highlight with our County Council Communications Team.

There is a real focus, too, that people on low incomes or in areas with poor broadband may become digitally excluded without action to address digital access although the COVID-19 response has created new and strengthened relationships between communities, local government, local businesses, and non-for-profit organisations.

Some charities who rely on cash donations have expressed concern about ongoing funding, though benefits of cashless payment may develop. As has been identified, a move towards cashless payment has occurred during lock-down affecting those without bank accounts and more vulnerable groups. Following lock-down, the **'cashless society' may become the new norm** (some of you may have seen the documentary on television just this week?) as people become used to using technological payment methods, including mobile phones.

During lock-down, there was an increased engagement with people's local environment, and appreciation of the benefits to the natural world. I am informed today, too, that since the start of 2021 traffic flow has reduced by around 30%.

Lock-down perhaps demonstrated our impacts on the environment, and that changes can be made. With proposed changes in planning there are threats and opportunities. One opportunity is to build in planning design and requirements around greenspace as an **increasing proportion of people recognised the importance of green space and well-being**. It's, perhaps, just one of the reasons why significant numbers of people are looking to re-locate to our part of the world!

You will, perhaps, have seen recent figures regarding new Covid-19 cases with Torridge best-placed amongst all places (including Cornwall) in the South West. Please maintain every effort to keep this so. You have been superb to date and my view is that the light at the end of the tunnel, despite current rates of infection is becoming brighter.

Some of you, I'm sure, will know that I am stepping down at the next election. It's a decision I've not taken lightly as I've been a thorn in the side of many for some 14 years (12 years at DCC) and, I've loved every minute of it!

I want to say a big thank you to all members of our town and parish councils (past and present) for their ongoing 'support' over the years. I know that support comes through different channels - sometimes, very challenging, but, nevertheless supportive in trying to improve things for others. Make no mistake I am extremely saddened in needing to take this decision of stepping down, which is the result of my need to focus, essentially, on matters of health and well-being within my own, quite unique family.

My very best wishes, as always, to you all, and please keep safe.

Barry