County Councillor's Annual Report 26th April 2021 – Kingskerswell

The thread running through my reports for the last year has been our response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We started with our first lockdown, the closing of all non-essential business in the County and how communities could help themselves. We all had to grapple with Zoom, Teams and Webex – "Your muted!" has been the phrase of the year.

Gradually we learnt how to control the virus. Devon has been one of the most successful Authorities in the UK – we have had one of the lowest infection rates, our hospitals have managed successfully, and we have had the fastest roll out of the vaccine in the country.

All through this we have been advised by Devon's Director of Public Health to remember the mantra - It's vital to continue:
↔ Making space
😊 Covering your face
👏 Washing your hands

Devon's Trading Standards have been passing on the message 'stay home, stay safe and stay scam aware'. Sadly, the most unscrupulous in our society saw an advantage – there have been too many scams to list here but you can make yourself aware on the Trading Standards website.

Remarkably quickly a new version of normal life came about. Meetings that had been cancelled became virtual meetings and before we knew it the usual busy round of committees had restarted. We held 18 public meetings broadcast live, produced 78 reports and listened to 8 public speakers. My committee looked at 5G and maintained work on problem gambling, lobbying government on both issues.

An issue for the new Council after 7th May will be how to facilitate in person meetings because government has decreed that even though Parliament can meet virtually, local government cannot. I Chair the Climate Emergency Standing Overview Committee and we will be in the ludicrous position of having to drive across the county to meet for an hour and a half. I met our MP last week and I'm pleased that she is lobbying hard on our behalf.

In September Devon's householders had the chance to help the county become net-zero by joining Devon Climate Emergency's (DCE) solar panel group-buying scheme. Solar Together and, with group buying experts iChoosr Ltd, they offered homeowners the chance to buy high quality solar PV more cheaply than if they were buying alone.

Research by the University of Exeter shows that 19 per cent of all Devon's carbon emissions are created by our homes, with more than half of those by grid-supplied electricity. Installing solar panels will reduce the amount of grid-supplied electricity needed for things like hot water, with a transfer to more eco-friendly solar energy.

In November, the County Council sought views on plans for a 5km section of the multi-use trail next to the Teign estuary, starting at the Passage House Inn in Newton Abbot and joining the A381 at La

Roche Maurice Walk. From there, a shared use path would link to the junction near Morrisons supermarket, at the western edge of Teignmouth.

As part of the consultation, webinars were held to cover the scheme proposals and provide people with the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback to the project team. The consultation was hugely successful and the Council is now preparing a 'shovel ready scheme' and applying for grant funding.

After huge lobbying led by Marcus Rashford more than 15,000 children across Devon received food vouchers over Christmas, as the county council combated holiday hunger. The children were receiving free school meals and their families were able to buy food with the vouchers over the festive holiday.

The £1 million scheme involved vouchers which were redeemable in major supermarkets across Devon (but not the Co-op). After I raised the issue privately and at the County Council arrangements were put in place for families who could not get to a supermarket. Eligible children in pre-school and young people in sixth form colleges also received the vouchers. Another £1 million was spent to cover half-term and the Easter holidays.

In January I reported about another possible pandemic – avian flu. People who kept just a few birds as pets or thousands, were legally required to keep birds indoors or take appropriate steps to keep them separate from wild birds.

Poultry and captive bird keepers were advised to be vigilant for any signs of disease in their birds and any wild birds and seek prompt advice from their vet if they have any concerns. They could help prevent bird flu (avian flu) by maintaining good biosecurity on their premises. Keepers were encouraged to register their birds with DEFRA so they could be contacted quickly if there was an outbreak in their area and action required. Owners of more than 50 birds were legally required to register their flock but those with fewer than this number were still encouraged to do so.

I also reported that three companies had been selected to roll-out full fibre broadband networks on behalf of the Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) programme.

Airband, Truespeed and Wessex Internet will be installing full fibre broadband across Devon and Somerset to more than 56,000 rural homes and businesses over the next four years. The combined public and private sector investment of around £80million will be in the vanguard of the Government's ambitions to build a Gigabit capable network across the UK.

In the new roll-out, Airband will be expanding its full fibre coverage into rural areas of Somerset, East Devon, as well as areas of Mid Devon, South Hams and Teignbridge.

We had a tough winter – freezing temperatures cause havoc on our highways. Snow showers and freezing conditions swept across Devon in February. Devon's fleet of gritters were working around the clock to treat the salting network and the authority urged people to avoid all but essential travel.

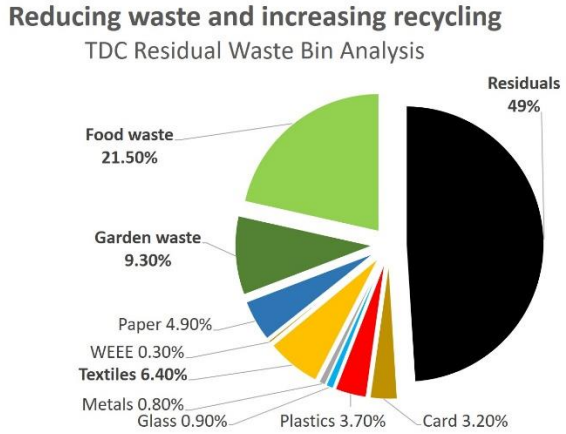
With road surface temperatures dropping to as low as -8C across Devon conditions were hazardous for anyone travelling in the county. During operations, a Devon County Council gritter over-turned near Holne on Dartmoor, highlighting the treacherous conditions. The driver was shaken by the incident but was unharmed.

This spring climate conscious Devon residents were urged to reduce their carbon footprint by cutting down on the clothes they buy and instead get the most out of what they have.

The 'fast fashion' industry is the second highest carbon-creating industry in the world and emissions from textile production outweigh the total carbon footprint of international flights and shipping combined. Producing the clothes we wear creates 1.2 billion tonnes of CO2e each year, accounting for over 10 per cent of all global carbon emissions.

The production of a single t-shirt creates the same amount of emissions as driving from Exeter to Plymouth, and in Devon around 6,500 tonnes of textiles are still ending up in waste bins each year.

If re-used instead of binned, this would save 33,800 tonnes of CO2. If residents avoided buying new clothes for a whole year, it would save a staggering 132,860 tonnes of CO2.



Monday 1st March started the UK's first Food Waste Action Week and highlighted the link between food waste and climate change. The Food Waste Survey 2019 estimates that, on average, almost one in four potatoes (22.8 per cent) are thrown away uneaten, compared to around a fifth of bread (21.5 per cent), chicken (20.5 per cent) and milk (18.4 per cent).

In March residents were invited to have their say on the draft Resource and Waste Management Strategy for Devon and Torbay.

The new document presented how the 10 councils responsible for waste collection or disposal in Devon, will continue to work with residents to try to reduce the amount of household waste created and continue to ensure that waste is managed in a sustainable and cost-efficient manner.

Finally, I reported on Devon's £578.5 million Budget process. Although almost every budget line had increased – the first time since the introduction of 'Austerity' we were staggered to see that the budget for highways had been cut – these cuts falling on winter operations and Highway management.

Following representations made by my Party and the recommendations made by me as Chair of Scrutiny, the Leader announced an extra £600,000 would be added to the county council's roads budget under a new plan announced later at Cabinet.

The Lib Dem Budget amendment which comprised investing £3.4 million on fixing Devon's roads (filling potholes, routine maintenance, repainting white lines and investing in cycling and walking); £1/2 million on supporting communities who want 20 mph zones; £1/2 million on Green Devon

schemes (Bee corridors, wildflower verges); £1 million supporting “Made in Devon” and “Bought in Devon” schemes and £3/4 million for mental health support for children. This all to be paid for by a draw down from the £64.4 million Budget Management Reserve set up to support this very type of thing.

Finally, this amendment sought to end the tax loophole whereby second homeowners can switch from Council Tax to Business rates and then claiming small business exemptions.

You won’t be surprised to know that many Conservative Councillors echoed the North Devon MP’s call for Highway improvements but failed to vote for the amendment that would have actually given them those improvements!

After 4 hours of debate the Council voted for a 4.99% increase in Council tax which comes down to £1,511.28 per Council Tax band D property for 2021/22. We all received our Council tax bills a few weeks ago.