

Devon have helped small businesses and community projects across the county to bounce back following the pandemic by awarding £800,000 in grants.

The Devon Elevation Fund, funded by government, awarded grants to small businesses and community projects across the county to respond to the different trading environment resulting from the pandemic, plan for future growth and initiatives, develop new products and services and improve infrastructure.

The awards were primarily focused on businesses in the economic sectors that were the hardest hit by COVID-19, such as tourism, hospitality, retail and food and drink. Successful applicants came from every district in Devon, where a total of 93 projects were awarded between £2,500 and £25,000 for a range of schemes from boosting the skills of their workforce to creating new jobs and future proofing enterprises.

Nine new businesses were planned, 124 new products and services were created, and 128 Devon professionals were 'upskilled' through training and development. Additionally, 19 feasibility studies were developed to help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Start-ups, Social Enterprises and community organisations better understand the viability of future projects.

The Devon Elevation Fund helped businesses realise their potential to bounce back even stronger by advising and assisting them to adapt, innovate, diversify, and improve productivity.

Devon County Council is set to agree an in-depth review to address "serious" failures in its governance. A report to be presented to the council's Procedures committee says the authority "finds itself in a very different operating context and the need for a review of priorities is required."

Describing the council's internal position as "very challenging," it cites failing children's services and budget sustainability as two major factors, whilst accepting there is "concern from stakeholders regarding confidence in the council to address these challenges."

Westminster has already issued the council with an improvement notice, adding in December that it was "extremely concerned" about its children's services. A commissioner has been appointed to oversee improvement.

The report also warns there is a "material threat of a s114 notice" – an effective declaration of bankruptcy – due to a growing overspend on caring for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Since 2020, Devon's total running overspend on the SEND service – effectively debt – has risen to around £127 million, a figure projected to increase to £153 million by March 2024. The amount is more than the county has in reserves.

The report goes on to state, in light of recent management changes and the pandemic: "This is an opportune time to consider ... future governance arrangements, making the necessary improvements as expected by the minister, the DFE, the commissioner and the SEND improvement board."

The "root and branch" review will be split into two phases, each lasting six months. It will be led by a cross-party working group of the procedures committee, which exists to review the council's constitution and how it functions.

Devon are inviting schools, youth clubs, families and carers of children and young people to visit us at our stand at the Devon County Show next month, on Thursday 18, Friday 19 and Saturday 20 May 2023.

The Council is making 'children and families' the theme of the stand as part of the commitment for Devon to be the best place to grow for children and young people; a safe and green county that provides young people with the best possible start in life; that educates its children well, equipping them for employment or training and successful futures that enable them to live and thrive in Devon.

For the first time we are excited to announce that Sound Communities will be bringing their 'Boom Bus' to the stand, and will be using music, radio and creative media production to demonstrate and teach visitors new skills that can help build self-confidence and improve young people's mental wellbeing.

If you enjoy music, then don't forget to visit The Music Hub stage on Avenue K and listen to live musical performances from Devon schools and youth groups across the three show days.

For parents and carers of younger children through to late teens, the Public Health Nursing team will be on the stand. They'll be offering health advice to help your family, children and young people to grow and flourish, including information on mental health and wellbeing as well as a comfortable baby-friendly feeding area.

Tiny Travels, also on the stand this year, will be offering families a fun, interactive educational opportunity to learn about different world cultures, featuring instruments, crafts and play food from around the world. There will also be a colouring table, reading corner, puzzles and music.

The Fostering service will be there to talk to people who are interested in the vital, positive role that foster carers play in the lives of the children in care in Devon. They'll be offering advice on how you can plan your fostering journey, and the difference you could make to the life of a child or young person.

This year, Fostering in Devon will be proudly supported by the Exeter Chiefs Community, and they'll be joining the team on the stand on Friday with fun games and the chance to win a signed Exeter Chiefs rugby ball.

Recycle Devon will be also there, helping families to learn recycling skills to input into everyday life. They'll be encouraging young people to take part in gaining their Recycle Devon Guides and Scouts badges. They'll also have guidance on what people should and shouldn't be putting in their bins.

And by way of refreshment, there will be The Coffee Stop – a local converted mobile coffee van serving freshly ground barista-made coffee alongside a variety of delicious locally made cakes and savouries.

You'll find our Devon County Council at Stand 325, Road 8.

Please do not forget the Mobile Library consultation can be accessed here -

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/haveyoursay/consultations/mobile-libraries-consultation/>

Remember it finishes on the 26th May.

Alistair Dewhirst - alistair.dewhirst@devon.gov.uk / Tel 07836 704127