

Annual Report from Cllrs Nicky Hopwood (Woolwell Ward) and Barrie Spencer (Bickleigh and Cornwood Ward)

Another strange year has passed with nearly the first three months in lock down and then various restrictions until the end of 2021 and then this year spent gradually returning to normal. The council was always prepared for remote working, so all this has affected us a lot less than many councils. Our staff have worked incredibly hard throughout.

One of the main tasks during the year has been paying out all the various grants government made to various types of businesses. There have been twelve different schemes altogether and the council has paid out a total of £85.9 million to local businesses during the pandemic. Sometimes we had some discretion over which businesses could receive these, such as the Additional Restriction Grants (ARG) scheme where the council paid out 99.8% of the total government allocation of £3.619 million by the end of March this year. A total of 19,775 individual grants were made to businesses across the various schemes. The last scheme was the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure grant where the Council paid out £2.87 million. All the schemes finished on 31 March 2022.

Work round the rest of the Council has continued as normal. We set up and passed our new corporate plan, known as Better Lives for All. This has a thirty-year vision and sets out a series of projects and actions for the Council for the next three years. It has been fully costed and regular reports appear to track the progress of the things we are trying to do to improve all aspects of life in the South Hams. It covers climate change and biodiversity, delivering quality council services, strengthening community wellbeing, improving homes, stimulating a thriving economy, and protecting, conserving and enhancing our built and natural environment.

House building remains controversial, mainly because there is a perception that the council is not delivering enough affordable housing. I can assure everyone that we fight to the last block to achieve at least 30% affordable housing on larger sites and have achieved this in new permissions ever since the Joint Local Plan was adopted in March 2019. We have delivered 138 new affordable houses this year, 130 in 20/21 and 136 in 19/20. There are 264 projected for next year, so unless there is undue slippage, we shall have delivered over 650 new affordable houses during the life of the council. Work continues to try to make best use of our affordable housing stock, which is why we are offering cash incentives to people either to downsize or to step up to shared ownership to free up badly needed family sized rented homes. We have set up a Disabled Adapted Panel which looks at and helps people who are finding it hard to live in their present home. Sometimes adaptations help, but often a different option of a flat or bungalow is a better solution. The latter applies to about two thirds of those helped under this scheme: over 100 households this year. Homelessness is a constant problem, and many have been dislodged by owners wanting to

turn accommodation into short term lets. Our team performs constant miracles in managing to rehouse people, not always with their first choice of housing in an emergency but finds them a roof and a breathing space to look around. Our aim is always to disrupt lives as little as possible, especially children's schooling.

We shall continue to lobby government on housing problems in the district. Whilst we appreciate the value of visitors and welcome them, all accommodation cannot be turned over to them at the cost of denying local people somewhere they can afford to live. The aim is to achieve the right balance. Many businesses were unable to work at 100% capacity last summer because they could not find staff, or accommodation for staff. We have achieved a win on getting new regulations for business rates for second homes but there is more to do.

Local prosperity continues to be one of our main preoccupations. We need to retain more of our brighter entrepreneurial minds, and they need to be able to return to the area to live when they have finished further education. The Freeport at Plymouth, Langage and Sherford should be able to offer more better paid skilled jobs. We are currently building six new employment units in Salcombe where marine businesses will have priority as tenants. South Devon College is opening a marine technical department at Noss on Dart very soon. Good broadband is essential for business and even everyone's daily lives and we have appointed an officer to help community groups access the local programme to roll out broadband to the areas poorly served until now.

Climate change, biodiversity and carbon reduction have become major themes. We have set up grants for local groups to help them with local actions and have introduced a new mowing regime for areas of council land where the parishes were in agreement, with the aim of increasing biodiversity in these areas by at least 30%. Plans are being formulated to replace our van fleet with electric vehicles soon.

Our Achille's heel remains waste collection which is not running as we would have hoped. The new rounds, designed by our contractor, have been a disaster and until they are changed again, we cannot expect 100% performance. Nevertheless, this has to be taken in context, because there are very few council waste services across the country this year, whether contracted out or in house, which have not seen some major disruption due to either lack of HGV drivers or Covid. We can only apologise for this and assure you that serious moves are afoot to remedy the situation.

Finally, we move into the new municipal year with exciting plans afoot for the Devon County Deal. This form of devolution from central government will see a good deal of money usually spent on Devon spent directly by government devolved to all our councils in Devon to spend as we see fit. This will include skills, transport and housing.