

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL
Wednesday, 13 September 2017

1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR GREENSLADE
Re: Coastal Communities

The recent report by the Social Market Foundation revealing how Coastal Communities lag behind, in terms of pay & jobs, highlights how important good communications are to developing economic performance. Therefore could the Leader/Cabinet Member please tell me how the County Council is progressing with implementing my previously agreed notice of motion which calls for direct rail services to be established between Barnstaple & London and return?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR DAVIS

The provision of a direct rail link between Barnstaple and London would be undertaken by the operator. There are two potential operators:

1. GWR (part of the First group) who currently run the line from Barnstaple to Exeter and Exeter to Paddington.
2. First/MRT who have just won the franchise on the Exeter Waterloo Line.

Initial discussions have taken place with the First/MRT who have not included running direct trains from Barnstaple to London in their new franchise. The next opportunity will be the rebidding of the GWR Franchise in a couple of years. We will be in discussions with potential Franchisees as the process evolves.

2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR GREENSLADE
Re: North Devon Link Road

North Devon Council have supported a notice of motion calling on the County Council to invite the Secretary of State for Transport to come to North Devon for a round table debate on how the Dept of Transport could help the County Council fast track improvements to the Link Road? This is even more urgent given the tragic number of accidents of late. Will the Leader/Cabinet Member agree to invite the Secretary of State for Transport to visit North Devon for this purpose?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR DAVIS

Jesse Norman MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Department for Transport visited Tiverton in August 2017. This provided an opportunity for the Council to press the case for improvements to the North Devon Link Road.

The Local Major Bid for improvements to the Link road is due to be presented to the DfT at the end of 2017. It is intended to bring a paper to Cabinet on an approach to improving the route in October.

Bearing in mind this is a competitive bid discussions will take place with DfT and the Local MP to understand the protocol of lobbying the Secretary of State while a bid is being assessed.

3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR GREENSLADE
Re: Flood Defence Works

During the previous County Council support was given to my notice of motion calling on Government to increase funding for flood alleviation. Can the Leader/Cabinet Member say what steps have been taken to action this motion?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CROAD

In July 2016 the previous County Council resolved to (i) endorse the spirit of the Notice of Motion raised by Councillor Greenslade and direct Cabinet to continue to call on Government for increased investment in measures to reduce flood risk in ways which fairly reflect the needs of large, rural counties such as Devon and (ii) endorse the ongoing implementation of the priorities set out in the Devon Local Flood Risk Management Strategy in collaboration with all relevant bodies, making best use of available resources.

Since then, suitable opportunities have been taken to pursue such action through direct contact with central government and close engagement with the Flood and Water Management Group of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT). This has included:

- a) sustained research and lobbying of Defra by ADEPT on the funding allocated to local government to address flood risk through Sustainable Drainage Schemes;
- b) representation to the Department for Communities and Local Government about its property level resilience scheme and support for flood victims;
- c) input to the Defra evaluation of the effectiveness of its current approach to investment in flood prevention, specifically highlighting the need to address the prioritisation of schemes in rural communities.

As part of the Autumn Statement in November 2016, the Government announced the allocation of an additional £15m for natural flood management measures. Devon has been successful in securing £1.05m of this funding for four projects in North Devon (x 2), East Devon and on Dartmoor.

This Council continues to be successful in its bids for national flood defence grant-in-aid and for contributions from the 'local levy' to support the delivery of its high priority flood defence schemes, as set out in the investment programme approved by Cabinet each spring. These funding sources are also being used for the new 'Property Level Protection Grants' being offered by the Council for flood resilience measures undertaken by individual householders. As a result of its collaboration with other Risk Management Authorities, the County Council anticipates spending in excess of £2.5m on flood management issues in the current financial year.

4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR GREENSLADE
Re: Defence Establishments in Devon

At the last County Council meeting I was concerned by the Leader's answer saying he saw no urgent need to commission an economic impact study into the effect on the Devon economy arising from Government plans to close RMB Chivenor and make other changes to defence establishments in the County. Does the Leader/Cabinet Member not accept that if we are to mount a successful campaign to retain these important defence establishments in Devon an economic impact study prepared now is needed?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR BARKER

The MOD Estate Optimisation Strategy announced the intention to close RMB Chivenor by 2027, as part of the MoD's efforts to reduce the size and costs of its estate. In March 2017, the Secretary of State for Defence stated that the Ministry of Defence has not made final decisions about the future of RMB Chivenor, but that he expects it to do so within 18 months.

To ensure that we are prepared for every eventuality, Devon County Council, North Devon Council and Somerset County Council are submitting a joint bid to the Local Enterprise Partnership for funding to commission an assessment of the economic potential of both the RMB Chivenor and RMB Norton Manor Camp (near Taunton) sites.

As part of a broader partnership of local authorities and public bodies across Devon & Torbay, we have also submitted an initial expression of interest into the government's One Public Estate programme. If successful, and subject to a full application and agreement from other members of the Partnership, that programme could potentially support the development of options for future uses for the Chivenor site.

5. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR ATKINSON
Re: Public Sector Funding

As we approach the budget review process at Devon County Council, no one in government seems able to tell us how authorities will be funded after 2020 when we are supposed to become self-financing. Having seen our revenue budgets cut by 76% since 2010 in the name of austerity, DCC is already facing financial crisis compounded by funding for adult and children's social care consuming two-thirds of our budgets.

It seems DCC, like other English local authorities is currently facing financial meltdown. This will be compounded with the phasing out of a central revenue support grant without the compensation of a locally held business rate underpinned by a yet-to-be defined redistribution formula, in which rich councils would have to help compensate the poorest like Devon, with its small tax bases yielding low business rates. As we have a legal requirement to balance our books – how can we achieve this and maintain services at the current already severely diminished level after 7 years of government austerity without continuing central government revenue support grant? How does the uncertainty over funding affect our ability to develop a sustainable effective strategy and financial plan over the next and subsequent financial years? What steps will the current administration take to ensure Devon gets fair funding to maintain and improve the current level of services and will be subject to no more cuts?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY

The Medium Term Financial Strategy identifies the loss of the Revenue Support Grant and the scale of the challenge ahead of the authority if sufficient alternative funding is not forthcoming. There is still uncertainty over the timing and content of 100% Business Rates Retention but the recent announcement of the continuation of the existing Business Rates Pilots and the addition of new Pilots for 2018/19 is welcome news.

The County Council continue to work with partner organisations to lobby Government for fairer funding and will take advantage of every opportunity for fairer and sustainable funding for Devon.