

## Report of the Cabinet Member

### Policy, Corporate, Resources and Asset Management

#### **Introduction**

I have been asked to report as follows for Full Council on 3 December 2020:

1. By Councillor Hannaford on the option for all eligible electors in the Devon County Council area to vote entirely by post in the next set of local elections in 2021 because of the Covid-19 pandemic'
2. By Councillor Hannaford on the spending review announcements by the chancellor, and how this will affect Devon County Council.

#### **Response**

##### **1. Eligible Electors and Postal Voting**

As Members will be aware, earlier in 2020 and due to the COVID pandemic the Government legislated to postpone all planned elections and referenda until 6 May 2021.

Since then the Government has confirmed that there will be no further primary legislation around elections which rules out:

All out postal voting;  
Changes to polling hours; and  
Allowing by-elections or referenda to take place before 6 May 2021

The Government does however recognise that the polls in 2021 will present new challenges and that electoral administrators will have to make changes.

A recent letter from Chloe Smith MP Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution said it was not necessary for significant changes such as imposing an all-postal vote or changing polling days or times (which would require primary legislation). The Government remains of the view that all-postal voting increases fraud risks, and removes the choice from voters who may wish to cast their vote in person.

The Government are however considering a potential smaller change to legislation to support electors with absent voting, an update on which should be provided in due course, as well as considering other ways of ensuring voter participation which includes a digital application process for postal and proxy voting. The Government has however confirmed it will be considering secondary legislation to make COVID-19 related restrictions (i.e. quarantining and self-isolation) an eligibility for emergency proxy voting, as is already the case in Scotland.

Currently the Government are issuing resources for Local Authorities to use to help voters understand their voting options for the May 2021 polls. With the relevant measures in place, polling stations will be safe places to vote, but voters will also need to be made aware of their absent voting options including what they need to do to apply for an absent vote in time for the polls.

Due to the changing nature of the impact and response to coronavirus nationally and locally, it will be important that communication plans are flexible and can be adapted to respond to changing circumstances throughout the period leading up to the polls.

## **2. Spending Review 2020**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, presented the Spending Review to the House of Commons on the 26th October. Following last year's one-year spending review, this year's was planned to be a full 3 year Spending Review but it is not a surprise that due to the economic and financial impact of the Pandemic this was reduced to one year.

The Spending Review provided more detail than some have in the past, but the Council's funding allocations will not be known until next week at the earliest when the Provisional Settlement is due to be announced. The size of some grant funding streams may not be known until the new calendar year.

The key messages from SR2020 that will impact next year's budget are set out below:

- Core Spending Power to increase by 4%. This is a headline average and does not mean that our funding will increase by this amount as the figure includes Council Tax;
- A new Social Care grant of £300 millions nationally has been announced. This is to support both Children's and Adults Social Care;
- The Council Tax increase that will trigger the need for a referendum has been announced as 2%;
- The option to set an Adult Social Care Precept of up to 3% has been announced. If the full percentage is not used in 2021/22 there is an option to carry forward the unused amount to 2022/23;
- It has been confirmed that the current Social Care grants will continue next year;
- 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;
- The National Living Wage will increase by 2.2% next year to £8.91 per hour;
- A grant of £670 million nationally has been announced to offset some of the impact the Pandemic is having on the Council Tax Base for next year;
- A Council Tax Income Guarantee Scheme has been announced that will compensate authorities for 75% of irrecoverable losses in the current year;
- The current New Homes Bonus scheme will continue next year;
- The Fairer Funding Review, 75% Business Rate Retention and the Business Rates Reset have been delayed;
- Covid funding of £1.55 billions nationally has been announced for next year; along with
- The continuation of the 75% Covid Sales Fees and Charges compensation scheme into the first quarter of 2021/22.

As part of the Spending Review the following grants were also announced. These grants, with the possible exception of Cyber security do not form part of the settlement and are expected to be specific ring-fenced grants. Some of the grants are for revenue purposes and some capital with a mixture of allocation by formula and grant funds that authorities are able to bid for.

- Cyber Security modernisation £16 millions;
- Test & Trace £15 billions;
- Personal Protective Equipment £2.1 billions;
- Rough Sleepers £254 millions;
- Domestic Abuse £98 millions;
- Troubled Families £165 millions;
- School Transport Capacity £70 millions;
- Secure Children's Homes £24 millions;
- Social Housing Decarbonisation £60 millions;
- Roads Maintenance & upgrades £1.7 billions;
- Cycling £257 millions;
- High Street Regeneration £621 millions; and
- Levelling up for local infrastructure £4 billions.

#### What this means for Devon

We won't know for sure what this means for Devon until the Provisional Settlement – which should be week commencing 14th December, but the Spending Review announcements should help us to set a balanced budget

**John Hart**

Cabinet Member

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