

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**  
**Wednesday 10 March 2021**

**1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD**  
**Re: Domestic Violence Budget and Programmes.**

Can the Cabinet Member please indicate how Devon County Council will make full use of this year's budget allocation of £19m for domestic violence programmes, and funding network of respite rooms for homeless women?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CROAD**

The Government has not yet published the allocation or bidding mechanisms for the £19m domestic abuse funding announced in the budget. It is unlikely that this funding will be allocated directly to local authorities. Within the total, £15m is dedicated to programmes to reduce re-offending by perpetrators of domestic abuse. Similar funding has recently been distributed from the Ministry of Justice to Police and Crime Commissioners. Devon has benefited from this funding and will be well placed to respond to further funding opportunities because a Behaviour Change programme for perpetrators has already been piloted and expanded across Devon. The programme has shown very positive impact on changing perpetrator behaviours and is being evaluated by the University of Exeter. Unfortunately, as in previous years, the funding announced in the budget is for one year only. This means that programmes are not sustainable: the ability to recruit and retain specialist staff is limited and long-term impact is difficult to evaluate.

The remaining £4m announced will be spread over two years to pilot a network of "respite rooms" to provide specialist support to homeless women facing severe disadvantage. There is at least one project ongoing in Devon that aims to support this vulnerable group, so again Devon will be well placed to respond to the new funding.

**2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD**  
**Re: Okehampton to Exeter Line**

Can the Cabinet Member please make an official statement regarding the budget announcement that more than £40m of funding has been made available to reinstate passenger services on the Okehampton to Exeter line, subject to the final approval of costs and contracts.

## **REPLY BY COUNCILLOR DAVIS**

Last week the Chancellor announced more than £40 million of funding to reinstate passenger services on the Okehampton to Exeter line, subject to final approval of costs and contracts. This is a very welcome statement and great news for people in the Okehampton area. The County Council has invested a huge amount of time and money to keep the line alive with the Summer Sunday Rover service and the reintroduction of regular weekday services will be a huge boost. Behind the scenes, we have been working closely in partnership with Network Rail, GWR, Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership and local partners to help build momentum with the project and reach this crucial stage. The new rail services will be another key element in supporting the County's economic recovery and decarbonisation of transport as we expect to see people switching to rail for journeys into Exeter as well as people seeking alternative access to Okehampton and Dartmoor. We expect further details to be announced by the end of March.

### **3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD Re: Plymouth Designation as a Freeport**

Can the Cabinet Member please confirm the potential financial and economic impacts on the wider Devon economy from Plymouth being officially designated as a Freeport in the budget?

## **REPLY BY COUNCILLOR GILBERT**

Devon County Council has welcomed Government's decision earlier this week to move the proposed Plymouth and South Devon Freeport forward in the national selection process. It is important to note however that the allocation remains indicative at present, and now requires the development of a full business plan to Government over the next three months to achieve formal designation. As such, Members should be aware that no detailed approval has been given by the three lead councils yet for progression of the proposal, and member authorities will require the full business plan to come back to relevant Councils over early summer for formal sign off.

With this caveat in mind however, initial proposals for the Plymouth and South Devon Freeport suggest it may generate up 9,000 new jobs across the area by 2027, as well as support around 70 local businesses and generate significant additional public and private sector investment. Initial assessment suggests that the project will also accelerate the development of the two allocated sites at Langage and Sherford by around 5-10 years each, with associated benefits in terms of securing infrastructure expenditure, business investment, employment creation and wider spill over benefits into local communities. Given the nature of the sites involved, it is also anticipated that a range of new trade, manufacturing and marine activity will be attracted to the area through the allocation.

With regards financial impact, initial figures produced for the Plymouth and South Devon Freeport proposal suggest that the combined site will generate £8.9m of retained business rates and associated charges across the Plymouth and South Hams area over its three first years. The establishment of the Freeport however (investment in essential Freeport infrastructure, retention and hiring of relevant staff etc) has a related cost of £3.2m over the same period, leaving a balance of £5.6m to be reinvested into wider site infrastructure and support. Beyond the first three years, figures have yet to be finalised, but initial estimates suggest up to £100m may be available for reinvestment by 2040. As with our Enterprise Zone, the Freeport approach would require this retain income to be reinvested into the development of related infrastructure and economic capacity in the local area, with an equitable split between Plymouth and South Hams based on generation. Further work will however now need to be taken forward to crystallise these draft figures and develop a medium-term investment plan for the Freeport as part of the Business Planning approach required for Government and Council approval.

With regard business rate impact for the three lead authorities, we understand that work is currently ongoing to finalise these figures. Unlike associated sites in Plymouth however, Devon's nominated sites at Llangage and Sherford are currently undeveloped. As such, any financial benefit accrued should be net additional to local finances, with the volume and investment approach involved due to be agreed over the next few months through the business planning cycle. However, both Devon County Council and South Hams District will clearly be seeking to ensure a full reinvestment of associated retained rates into local capacity, and this will need to be a key feature of any final business plan coming forward.

**4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD**  
**Re: New Towns Deal**

Does the Cabinet Member share my concern and disappointment that none of forty-five towns identified in the budgets £1 billion for the New Towns Deal are in the far South West?

Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that it's not acceptable the nearest places to benefit from this national initiative are Swindon and Bournemouth?

What other economic regeneration monies and growth funding was made available in the budget that Devon County Council can apply for in order to try and readdress this absence of proper focus on securing the far South West's economic future?

## **REPLY BY COUNCILLOR GILBERT**

The Council welcomed the announcements made through the Budget earlier this week, which brought forward a range of additional support for Devon and its residents. Key announcements included further resources in support of employment, apprenticeships and traineeships; more support for the business community, notably the hospitality sector through business rates and grants; extension to the furlough and self-employment support programmes; designation of a Freeport in the local area, and additional investment in infrastructure (notably £40m of additional support to reinstate rail services to Okehampton) and for the airport sector.

The Council particularly welcomes the Government's decision to invest a further £5bn in community renewal and levelling up funding over the lifetime of this parliament, asking local authorities to lead this process moving forward. Within Devon, this includes the prioritisation of 3 of our 7 districts (Torrige, West Devon and Mid Devon) for scheme expenditure, with an emphasis on supporting new local development and regeneration activity, providing additional support for skills and business development activity, and offer new opportunities for additional community investment and transport schemes.

With regards specific funding made available through the New Towns Deal approach, it was disappointing that the area wasn't included in the published programme list. However, the area has recently benefitted from significant investment through related programmes, including £15.8m through the Future High Street Fund in Barnstaple and Newton Abbot. The Council will now be seeking to build on this success through the Community Renewal and Levelling Up Funds to take forward the priorities set out in the Team Devon Recovery Prospectus, and the opportunities it provides.