



North Devon Liberal Democrats

Minutes of NDLD AGM

Saturday 5th December 2020, @ 2pm

Virtual Meeting (via Zoom)

1. **2020 AGM minutes** - approved.
2. **Chairman's (final) Report:** presented by Victoria Young; circulated and approved.
3. **Treasurer's Report:** presented by Pete Leaver; circulated and approved.
4. **Motion for Members; Revisions to 2014 NDLD constitution** – accepted.
5. **Election of the *Officers and Ordinary Members to the Executive Committee;**
 - (a) *Chair – Helen F Walker
 - (b) Vice Chair - *vacant*
 - (c) *Secretary – Victoria J Young
 - (d) *Treasurer - Pete Leaver
 - (e) *Diversity - *vacant*
 - (f) *Membership Development - Richard Toller
 - (g) *Data Officer – Jevon Whitby
 - (h) Events coordinator – Louisa York
 - (i) Fundraiser – *vacant*
 - (j) Comms (social media & press) - *vacant*
6. **Report from Liberal Democrat Group Leader on North Devon District Council.**
(attached) Presented by David Worden.
7. **Report from Leader of Barnstaple Town Council.** Verbal presentation by Ian Roome.
8. **AOB - None**

AGM Dec 2020 - NDC Report

David Worden, Leader, NDC

We have worked well with the Independents during the last year and the Conservative opposition has largely been a non-entity. One of the Tory group has recently left their group and joined the Independents and some of the others rarely attend or have anything constructive to say.

Obviously the progress and work of the Council has been hindered by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. We had a peer review last February with members and officers from other authorities having an in-depth look at our corporate plan, staffing structure and way we operate. This was part of our plan to review our weaknesses and strengths and enable us to transform our Council to be one of the very best. The report was very positive about the progress we have made since taking over the administration but gave us some pointers of how we can make further improvements. Not all of these ideas have been implemented yet as we have had to concentrate on keeping services operational which hasn't been easy with many of the staff working from home and with some staff being classified as vulnerable and needing to shield for their own health reasons or because of a member of their family. The staff who are working from home have been remarkable in adapting to their new conditions and we are fortunate that we have some very enthusiastic and capable people working for us.

During the pandemic we have been working very closely with the County Council and other District Councils in Devon. It has become known as Team Devon and we meet at least every two weeks and discuss issues affecting the county. In addition we have a Leader's meeting of the Devon District Councils on a regular basis. I have been asked to take over as chair of that group for next year. Regular meetings are also being held of the Heart of the South West (basically Devon and Somerset Council leaders and deputies) and the South West Councils which comprises of thirty-three councils from Gloucestershire to Cornwall. With all these meetings we are beginning to take a more active role, particularly with regard to tourism and coastal communities, the homeless, planning and in pressurising the government to support hospitality, agriculture and leisure industries. For example, we led the South West Councils response seeking help for financial support for leisure centres and Devon's response to the White Paper on Planning. For the latter we working particularly well with Torridge to oppose the government's plans to cover our green fields with concrete and to effectively remove much of the democracy involved in the planning process. Malcolm Prowse and I have also had regular meetings with our opposite numbers on the Torridge Council. One of the government's aims is to make councils much larger and become unitaries with more powers and a mayor. This has been delayed in our case, probably as a result of Brexit and the pandemic. Practically every week we have also had webinars and briefings

from government ministers. Currently we are pressing them to reorganise track and trace so that it is organised more locally and not just on a national level as it is not working effectively. In addition I have instigated and chair a meeting of the Lib Dem leaders on each of the Devon councils, including Plymouth and Torbay. We are meeting once a month and we are discussing common approaches, sharing ideas for publicity and motions for our councils etc. So far it has been a good forum for encouragement and support. I seem to be spending half my life on zoom or Teams.

So what have we achieved since the last AGM?

This has included the Council overseeing the giving out of millions of pounds to local businesses. Staff worked tirelessly during the first lockdown to trace those who were entitled to receive the government grants and by delivering over 95% of the allocated funds it has provided an important boost to the North Devon economy. Overall, the Council paid out over £45million in business grants and £20million in business rate expanded retail reliefs. Steps were also put in place as North Devon gradually opened up to tourists and measures were taken to help shops and businesses to reopen. We have also set out our vision for 2030 and identified themes and actions in order to provide a framework for recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic.

It is worth repeating that our ambition is to ensure that North Devon remains a highly desirable place where people are able to live well, work productively, move freely and benefit from excellent education, health, leisure and cultural facilities in harmony with nature and our world-class environment. Our Recovery Strategy focuses on building and supporting: A sustainable, inclusive economy, a net zero carbon society, promoting biodiversity gain and environmental improvement, and the health and wellbeing of our communities. The plan is a working document and will continue to evolve as circumstances change. It will involve changes to the governance of the Council to reflect new priorities and react to the new 'norm'. The plan commits the council to aspire to become carbon neutral as soon as possible before 2030 and to use its powers and influence to protect and improve the environment, while encouraging and supporting others to do the same. A post of Environment/Climate Change Officer is to be created jointly with Torridge to support the development and delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan.

We are hoping to install Electric Charging Points in Council Car Parks. Currently 19 car parks have been approved for future electric vehicle point solutions. They include car parks in Barnstaple, Ilfracombe, South Molton, Lynton, Mortehoe, Bickington, Fremington and Croyde. The first award has been made from the Climate and Environment Grant Fund of £10,000 to East Anstey Parish Council for their project to make Anstey Village Hall environmental and sustainable. This grant will be helping towards the cost of installing solar panels to help the hall become more energy efficient

and help eliminate climate change. The consequence of climate change was highlighted by the flooding in North Devon on 17th August 2020 and subsequently on several occasions. We set up a fund to help those without insurance who were affected by the flooding of 17th August with several members contributing from their community grants.

We are currently reviewing the officer structure of the council to see if there are areas we can make changes to increase our capacity. This was a need highlighted in the Peer Review and we need to look beyond just our operational services, revisit our corporate priorities and improve our ability to draw up readymade projects to bid for government funds when they become available. I am excited that we are discussing many possible projects which will for example involve our biosphere and help towards our contribution to creating clean energy growth for North Devon. It is important that we work this up to become 'shovel ready' so all we need is the funding when it becomes available. We also need to look at the capacity of some of our departments which appear very stretched at the moment particularly as the government expects us to do more and more for them. Going forward this will include help with the vaccination programme.

During the current lockdown we have once again been helping to co-ordinate a range of services for those in need by working alongside organisations such as One Northern Devon and the town and parish councils. Unlike in the first lockdown, the government did not handing out food parcels to the clinically vulnerable as the emphasis this time is on self-sufficiency. So we have been working to coordinate volunteers to help with grocery orders and deliveries, collection and delivery of medication, transport to medical and hospital appointments (using a local taxi firm) and financial support for those in serious hardship. We provided an online form at my.northdevon.gov.uk/service/Request_for_assistance and our phone line at 01271 388280 for those who have not been able to get support from family or volunteers.

One area that greatly concerned me when we took over the council was the waste and recycling service. There was a very high absentee rate among the staff, many lorries were breaking down, many bins were being missed. It wasn't a service many would say was fit for purpose. Although it isn't perfect yet significant progress has been made and I would like to thank Cllr. Alan Rennles, mayor of Barnstaple for awarding the waste and recycling team an award for their work during the pandemic. Unfortunately in the last couple of weeks several of our waste and recycling staff have contracted Covid 19 and others have had to self-isolate. This has created a big challenge for us to maintain the service.

Recently local restriction support payments have been made available for businesses required to close in England. This has amounted to properties with a rateable value of £15k or under, being given grants of £1,334 per month, those whose rateable value is between £15k-£51k receive grants of £2,000 per month and those with a rateable value of £51k or over receive grants of £3,000 per month. This has meant more work for our

staff checking and getting this distributed. In addition £1.1bn is being given to Local Authorities, distributed on the basis of £20 per head, for one-off payments to enable them to support businesses more broadly until the end of next year. We have made the decision not to pay it all out immediately but to keep some for helping businesses during 2021. We know that our leisure and hospitality industries and some of our self-employed are being particularly badly hit by the Covid 19 restrictions and will need support for some time.

If you read the Journal or Gazette you will see that there are good news stories every week about things which we are doing.

Our Community Housing Fund is helping four parishes progress community-led housing schemes in North Devon. This could enable the completion of up to 57 affordable homes for local people in the parishes of Parracombe, Morteohoe, Lynton and Lynmouth and Georgeham.

We have been actively helping the homeless and trying to get them off the streets. About a third of those that we got into temporarily accommodation during the first wave of the pandemic have now got a permanent home. We have used funding to help people into the private rented housing sector, to secure interim accommodation such as supported housing and to assess the wider support needed to help them rebuild their lives. This will be a challenge in the future as people lose their jobs as businesses do not survive the pandemic. In addition we delivered record number of affordable houses last year which is something that is very important for our local residents.

To assist those who are struggling NDC has provided a Local Hardship Fund in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with financial support from Devon County Council. This emergency fund has been used to give money to schools who have then identified and provided direct help to families and children most at need. Financial support has been given to the North Devon Food Bank and other groups working with and supporting our local communities and we still have more money available for this purpose.

Statistics from Devon County Council suggest that North Devon will potentially suffer more economically from the pandemic than anywhere else in the county. Particularly identified is Ilfracombe, Lynton and Lynmouth and parts of Barnstaple. We are still waiting to hear whether the funding for the Ilfracombe Watersports Centre will be finally approved but things are looking very hopeful. We are also waiting for the decision on our Future High Streets bid which is due any day now. If approved, this would provide a significant capital investment into Barnstaple and would enable us to move forward with plans to re-invigorate our High Street by improving the areas around the Pannier Market and Butchers Row.

It is pleasing to report that NDC is gaining a national reputation for some of the excellent work it is doing as a local government authority. The latest work to gain national recognition resulted in NDC being a finalist in two categories for the prestigious Local Government Chronicle Awards Ceremony 2020. Over 1500 local government professionals attended and it made me very proud as Leader to also attend virtually and hear our authority being named and praised. These awards are open to all the Unitary, County and District authorities throughout the country. You may remember the problem many councils had this summer with tons of litter being dumped by visitors particularly on beaches and beauty spots. NDC's Environmental Wardens Ray Jones and Alan Kyle wanted to prevent this in our area and together with our Communications Team came up with #ClearMessages. The idea was to raise the profile of these issues and crack down on anti-social behaviour through a programme of education, awareness and enforcement. This proved to be very effective.

In addition the Safe Sleep team became a finalist for the Local Government 'Team of the Year' award. They provided 1,857 nights of accommodation, over the winter, for more than 100 rough sleepers. Interdependent solutions were developed to serve these individuals and over a third of the group did not return to the streets. This is an example of NDC working together with both the statutory and voluntary sector organisations as the team included the Adult Social Services, Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services, the Police, and the Freedom Community Alliance (FCA).

NDC's website has once again been judged as being the best local authority website in the country in the quarterly national audit by independent specialists Sitemorse. The website underwent hundreds of tests, checks and measures which identify actions that improve the user experience, looking at factors such as loading speed, links and accessibility.

You may be aware that we have adopted the following slogan on our emails – Distance socially, spend locally, enjoy safely as part of our Live Love Local campaign. We have been promoting online shops, click and collect options, phone orders, Facebook sales, takeaway offers and vouchers to use later. So during November we made many of our Central Car Parks free from 16.00 – 18.00 each day to encourage residents to use, for example, the click and collect options. We have been running a Lockdown Shopping Directory to help residents to shop locally at this difficult time. You may have noticed that the comms team are coming out with graphic and colourful communications which deserve our praise. Other Districts and publications are now noticing it and commenting very favourably. It would be encouraging if those who are on Facebook would like or comment on the NDC FB page. It also gives you a flavour of the work we are doing.

Members of our group have been very active in bringing motions to the Full Council e.g. supplying meals for children of hard up families during the school holidays, opposing the government's plans in the Planning White Paper, protecting our farmers by maintaining food standards, parking on pavements, keeping the drains clear etc.

It has been a busy time but we are doing our busy to serve our residents and North Devon.

The main challenge once the pandemic is over is that we face a deficit of two million pounds next year because of loss of income resulting from Covid 19.

David Worden
28 Nov 2020