

County Councillor's Report, October 2020

Covid situation

Councillor Leadbetter, Cabinet member for Health & Social Care, told the County Council on 1st October: 'it is starting to feel like it did back in February, with increasing COVID-19 cases in the community and a slow but steady increase in infection in care homes and a rise in the number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals this week; a continuation of this will have an impact across the system.'

Devon's Director of Public Health has written to care homes advising that at present, providing infection control guidance is followed, they can continue with their own visiting policies. However, this situation is subject to an ongoing dynamic risk assessment and may change. I took part in discussions of the situation at the Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee on 10th September and a meeting with the Social Care leadership on 18th September.

Devon County Council is taking part in a Department of Health and Social Care COVID-19 testing pilot within Extra Care Housing (ECH) and Supported Living (SL). The pilot is Devon's opportunity to inform future national testing requirements and testing strategy for people living in these situations

NHS and non-Covid care

It is reported at the Council meeting that the NHS focus of this next period is a return of non-COVID-19 health services to near normal levels, preparing for winter, but obviously this depends on the pandemic situation. On 10th September, I got the Scrutiny committee to ask for a detailed plan to restore elective surgery, to be presented to the November meeting.

20 mph limits

At the Council meeting, In response to a request from me, Cllr Stuart Hughes, Cabinet member for Highways, presented a written report on the current state of the 20 mph policy. The long-awaited Newton Abbott trial may begin soon and it is still the case that policy will not be reconsidered until after this. However it was announced that in the meanwhile, a waiting list of requested proposals will be kept. I welcomed this development and will be writing to Cllr Hughes and the director of Highways to lodge the interest in 20 mph zones in Seaton, Colyton, Colyford, Beer and Offwell.

Black Lives Matter

The Council on 1st October heard moving speeches from students at the King's School, Ottery, supported by Development Education Devon, who explained how the Black Lives Matters movement had spurred them to speak out about the abuse and constant micro-aggressions suffered by young black people in Devon. The students, who have set up a group called

Diversity in Devon, worked with Cllr Claire Wright to present a motion calling for the Council to engage with the black and minority-ethnic (BAME) community in the County and press the Government to recognise the history of black oppression in the school curriculum.

Along with a similar motion from the Lib Dems, Claire's motion went (following the Council's normal arcane and undemocratic procedure) to DCC's Conservative-controlled Cabinet before being discussed by Council. The Cabinet approved a slimmed-down set of recommendations which - while not including all the points requested – represented real progress and all parties and groups (Labour, Lib Dems, Green and Independent) were able to support them. The first Cabinet amendment was therefore passed unanimously.

However the Conservative Group couldn't help spoiling the response and disrupting the unity of purpose. Once the Group saw the Cabinet recommendations, it insisted on diluting the commitment to 'engage with BAME people and organisations'. Embarrassingly for the Leader, Cllr Hart, he was forced to introduce an extra amendment saying the Council should 'engage with all residents in Devon'. This was an echo of the racist All Lives Matter movement which has attacked the idea of Black Lives Matter.

In my comments, I explained why this was unacceptable. I am over 70 and white, and I have never experienced racist abuse or even micro aggressions in my life. The young black woman who spoke to the Council, like most other black people, has experienced them regularly from an early age. Obviously it is black and ethnic minority people who personally experience the problem of racism, so it's them we should specially engage with.

Report over impact of final Brexit deadline

In response to a request from me, Councillor John Hart presented Council on 1st October with a depressing report about the effects of the rapidly nearing end of the Brexit transition period (31st December). It is clear that despite the best efforts of the Council and its officers, they remain basically in the dark about what will happen when the UK leaves the European Single Market and Customs Union in less than 3 months time. Responding to my comments, Cllr Hart said there was particular concern about ports, i.e. Plymouth. It has been announced that a giant lorry park has been prepared – as in Kent, where drivers will have to get a permit to cross the county border!

I told the Council that it is utterly irresponsible of the Government to proceed with this Brexit disruption, not asking for an extension to the transition, when the economy has already been badly hit by the pandemic. The Council estimates an 8 per cent hit to Devon this year will rise to 10 per cent if there is no trade deal with the EU. The Government's own estimates also show continuing damage over many years. It is indicative that Cllr Hart no longer bothers with the previously obligatory talk about the 'opportunities' as well as risks of Brexit..