

Axminster Division November 2023 Report

Budgeting and living with the means available

Devon County Council is going through a major restructure currently of how the 'business' operates, so that it can best serve the needs of the residents of Devon with the physical and financial resources available to it. There is a lot of publicity currently about the financial health of Local Government and a number of them issuing what is called a section 114 notice, in effect, this is a declaration that they cannot meet their obligations in producing a legally required budget and 'handing back the keys' to central government to send in commissioners to run services at the minimum legal level. There is often no one single reason for this but certainly growing demand for services, children's in particular, combined with inflation are major factors in many instances.

Devon County Council took early steps to address this and reorganise and as part of this are currently in advanced negotiations with the Department for Education for a very significant financial settlement (called the 'safety valve') and not currently at risk of having to issue a section 114 notice.

Setting a balanced budget early next year is going to be very difficult, resulting in some very difficult choices having to be made where core spending power has reduced in real terms by 27 per cent since 2010/11 as Councils remain firmly in the eye of the inflationary storm and finances are under pressure like never before.

'Levelling Up'

The Levelling up & Regeneration Bill recently received Royal Assent, a raft of new measures came into force which the government says will "put local people at the heart of development". County and District Councils will be expected to work with a faster and less bureaucratic planning system with developers held to account.

More beautiful homes (whatever that means in Devonshire English!), built alongside GP surgeries, schools and transport links, and environmental enhancement. Communities taking back control of their future with new powers to shape their local area.

This all sounds very good, but of course the proof of the pudding is in the eating and it will be interesting to see how Councils interpret the Bill where clearly, it's critical in protecting our rural green spaces, but much of it

seemingly has a more urban than rural focus and must not just be a tick box exercise.

The Act says will:

- Boost local services – requiring developers to deliver vital infrastructure. This will put an end to lifeless edge-of-town developments with no community assets and ensure developers deliver the schools, doctor's surgeries and public services communities need and expect. Further details on these measures will be set out shortly.
- Rebalance the housing and land markets, giving local councils the power to increase council tax on empty homes and reforming compensation for compulsory purchase orders by removing 'hope value' where justified.
- Encourage developers to get building; giving communities updates on the progress of development and giving councils the chance to consider slow 'build out' rates when approving planning.
- Bring high streets back to life, giving councils the powers to work directly with landlords to bring empty buildings back in to use by local businesses and community groups through high street rental auctions. It will also make it faster for local authorities to give hospitality businesses permission to use outdoor seating.

Station ticket offices proposals and other railway news

Although not a primary function of EDDC, many concerns have been raised with colleagues and me by residents about proposals to close all railway station ticket offices, with much reduced staff and hours of operation for larger or busier ones where staff would be on hand to help.

Following a lengthy nationwide consultation and much lobbying, the government has determined that they must be scrapped; not reaching the threshold of an acceptable replacement that was fair on all users of the railways. I think we all recognise that times are changing with most people buying tickets online from machines at railway stations, but these proposed major changes were too extreme at this time

Highways

DCC Highways teams have taken an absolute battering this year where climate change, flooding events in particular have decimated planned maintenance but despite that are pressing on with as much of the programme

as possible when not dealing with 'risk to life' events or clearing up after flooding, fallen trees and damaged buildings.

They are doing their best to keep all of the plates spinning and I would ask that you understand that they must prioritise workload those 'risk to life' events while not diminishing the priority of things you have reason to contact them for.

ENDS