

Devon County Council: key issues

COVID-19 – Team Devon remains in place. New announcements have been made by the PM and with infection rates declining rapidly in this area, and a high level of vaccines having been administered, schools will be returning next week and the roadmap for the re-opening of shops and hospitality has been outlined. Regularly updated information and advice is at this website link: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/coronavirus-advice-in-devon/>

DCC Full Council meeting – 18th February

The final Local Government financial settlement for 2021/22 had been announced as £103.2 millions (the same as 2020/21). The settlement was for one year only and was based on the Spending Round 2020 (SR20).

The Authority had not only received Core Funding but also specific grants that related to particular activities, the most significant specific grant was the Dedicated Schools Grant. For 2021/22 the Dedicated Schools Grant has increased to £589.1 millions (from £539.9 millions in 2020/21). The settlement had set the Council Tax increase that would trigger the need for a referendum at 2% for 2021/22, with social care authorities allowed a 3% social care precept. **A Band D Council Tax for the proposed budget was approved, with an increase of 4.99% to £1511.28.** The Council Tax requirement for the Council was £442,820,830.24 (n.b. This includes a U-turn on the potentially *disastrous cut of £307,000 in Devon's Highways budget*)

During the debate I supported the following 2 amendments that were proposed but lost the vote:

A. PUTTING DEVON BACK ON THE ROAD - Let's get Devon back to work. (Proposed by the Lib Dems)

"The Liberal Democrats budget amendment is a positive vision for Devon, putting it back on the road and helping the County back to work.

1. *We will invest more in fixing our roads, especially potholes and drainage while also supporting cycling and walking.*
2. *We believe a new 'Green Devon' initiative supporting the County's work to tackle climate change and protect the environment is urgently needed.*
3. *We will back business across Devon through a new economic support fund to promote and celebrate 'Made in Devon' – and launch a campaign encouraging residents and businesses to 'Buy in Devon' whenever possible.*
4. *A new investment of £750,000 in counselling and mental health support to help children and young people affected by the Lockdowns.*
5. *Invest an additional £3.4 million during 2021-22 on fixing Devon's roads to:*
 - *Fill the potholes and fix them better*
 - *Tackle legacy problems from underspending on highway drainage*
 - *Plan to bring back routine maintenance, as once carried out by Devon's length-man service, to keep blocked road drains clear*
 - *Invest in cycling and walking*
 - *Repaint missing faded white lines & junction markings*
6. *3. Invest £500,000 supporting local communities who want 20mph zones and speed limits, including around their schools.*
7. *4. Invest £500,000 in a new 'Green Devon' scheme supporting environmental projects such as bee corridors, wild flower meadows and verges, tree planting and helping local communities deliver their own environmental improvements.*
8. *5. Backing Devon Business to save and create jobs. Creating a new £1million economic support fund promoting 'Made in Devon' and 'Bought in Devon'. Devon can lead the way.*
9. *6. Mental health support for school children coping with the lasting impact of lock down. An additional £750,000 for counselling.*
10. *(Total invested is £6.15 million)*

We will pay for these priorities through a one-off draw down from the £64.4 million Budget Management Reserve to help Devon back on the road and back to work.

Other financial steps to help Devon work again. Urgently lobby Government to:

1. *End the tax dodge loop-hole of second home owners switching from Council Tax to Business Rates and then claiming 'small business' exemption, so they pay nothing at all.*
2. *Increase Council Tax on second homes by 100% (Ending the 'business rate tax-dodge' and increasing Council Tax on second homes could generate in excess of £20 million to support vital and much-needed services across Devon."*

B. This was further amended by the addition of the following changes by the Independent Group:

1. *" We welcome and support the increase in Budgets for the Financial Year 2021/22 in all service areas, after the increased funding from Central Government this year.*
2. *We ask that Council supports us in giving residents a Council Tax Holiday this year, by not implementing the 1.99% rise proposed.*
3. *We invest £1m in Rural Cycle routes, signalling a real intent to meet our Carbon reduction plan.*
4. *We ask that £1m is also invested in a lengths person service, so that every community has someone checking and clearing more regularly drains & gullies. We see this as a spend to save initiative, but for this year, will be paid for from reserves so as not to impact on other front- line services.*
5. *We Invest £200,000 in new books for the Library Service.*
6. *Our medium-term strategy had budgeted for a public sector pay rise, which has been frozen, and our reserve levels appear sufficient at £114.5m. We would pay for the above by taking £10.54m from reserves this year but look to secure savings in subsequent years on Agency Workers and Commissioning services.*
7. *We write to all Devon MP's & Treasury Department of Government, outlining the dire level of funding in all Public Sector Areas that Devon receives against the National Average, calling on them to level us up and ask that our MP's representing Devon, vote against any measure that does not see Devon being treated fairly & equitably."*

Regrettably both these two admirable amendments, which were well supported by opposition Councillors were lost and the original budget was passed unamended.

Free School Meals: Questions have been raised with me regarding the prioritisation by geographical distribution within the County of Free school Meals (i.e. there is a list, and we are not on it!). This is a support which should be equally available to child / family according to need. I have raised this with the officers and portfolio officer concerned and in the meantime written to all the schools in this division and provided information about applying for this support (and provided information about Food in Community Charity who glean free, high quality food, local which they distribute free to anyone who needs support).

DCC Recycling Centres – are experiencing long queues: A message has been issued by DCC, asking residents not to go unless you need to and be quick when there!

Highways Matters

I continue to press for 20mph speed limits to be considered asap and not await the Newton Abbott trial. There seems to be a growing consensus across the Council for this.

South Hams HATOC meeting 19.02.21.

- I brought an urgent item to the committee further a request from residents in the Rotherfold who have DCC resident parking permits but during Lockdown have found it difficult to find parking spaces on weekdays close to where they live. They had requested permission to park during Lockdown in the many vacant spaces in SHDC car parks during Lockdown. Their temporary solution of parking in the smaller Heaths car park for free due to a broken meter became a problem when the meter was mended. Despite HATOC members being in support of the resident's request, SHDC have continued to refuse this.
- Parking restrictions for no waiting at any time on the corner of Hillbrook Road and an extension of the existing no waiting at any time along a part of Brooklands to prevent obstructions were approved. A new disabled parking bay at Broomborough Drive was noted.
- I requested that proposals for 20mph speed limits are discussed at future HATOC meetings and this was agreed.

At previous SH HATOC meetings I have raised the need for additional resident's parking zones further to requests from groups of residents in Totnes and Dartington and where I have carried out local surveys to confirm a majority of

Travellers at DRA Car park: This was reported in to me as caravans having arrived. I enquired at SHDC whether these Travellers have been contacted by the SHDC Navigator officers who work with and support all rough sleepers. The same Travellers subsequently appeared at The Pavillions Totnes for a few days and again I was in contact with officers who confirmed these caravans would only be there for a few days as the people had come here for a funeral.

I have reported in the unused caravan on the **Newton Abbott Road (A381)** near Brutus bridge which has been on the roadside and empty for some months.

Totnes TC draft Climate & Ecological Emergency & Action Plan is making good progress. The meeting earlier this week discussed:

- Proposal for Planting Trees on the Town/Parish boundary project – see outline of project below & attached document
- Totnes Environmental Hub proposal
- Our Place Our Plan website <https://ourplaceourplanet.org> where some of the actions proposed for action in Totnes and the Green Travel plans will be posted
- Sustainable South Hams website map where groups working on climate emergency can share ideas and activities: <http://www.sustainablesouthhams.org>

The next Totnes Climate & Ecological Meeting, will take place on **Tuesday March 23rd at 6pm**. This will be a virtual Zoom meeting as follows:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81632190242?pwd=ZFZlZnNkXkxJ3Wm5DdXhnczBUZkpqdz09>

Meeting ID: 816 3219 0242 Passcode: 299511

Dial by your location: Find your local number: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81632190242?pwd=ZFZlZnNkXkxJ3Wm5DdXhnczBUZkpqdz09>

Totnes Area Tree Planting proposals

As an action that emerged from the Climate Emergency Action Planning week hosted in Totnes in November 2019, a tree planting group has been meeting to discuss planting trees. One of the proposals is to look into planting trees around the parish border of the town in conjunction with neighbouring parishes. This would not only support the planting of trees to a planned target and help reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but also could create a new network of wildlife corridors if adjacent parish councils also continued the planting around their borders in conjunction with their neighbouring parishes. This is a long-term project. It is hoped that the TC and neighbouring parishes will be interested in participating in this? (See attached project proposal) (The next meeting of the tree network is Tuesday 9th March at 4pm on Zoom at this link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89194825051?pwd=K2x3RmhFdnpzNStsbktVbTVESDlmUT09>

Devon County Council's Interim Carbon Plan – The public consultation has finished. Their plans and the draft carbon plan can be accessed at this link: Their newsletters and updates can be accessed at this link:

<https://www.devonclimateemergency.org.uk>

Totnes & District: Traffic & Transport Forum 24.02.21: The AGM will took place on Zoom. A new Steering group of 20 representatives of different sectors across the town and neighbouring parishes was agreed and representatives elected. John Scanlan (Follaton) was elected as the new chair and Chris Watson as deputy chair of the steering group and forum. The next T&D, TTF Steering group meeting takes place **on Wednesday 31st March at 6.30pm**. (Agenda and Link will be published on Totnes TC website at this link: http://www.totnestowncouncil.gov.uk/Traffic_and_Transport_614.aspx

Totnes COVID Response Partnership Network. These meetings hosted by TC (since last March) and which I chair, continue to take place every two weeks. They are attended by representatives from key groups involved in providing support and volunteers to assist residents who are vulnerable and/or need help during the pandemic. The groups involved include, Totnes Caring, Food In Community, Totnes Connection Hub/The Food Bank, Citizens Advice Bureau, Leatside Surgery, Street Pastors, Totnes Domestic Violence support group, South Hams COVID support / benefit officers, Totnes and Neighbouring parish Councillors. Each representative reports in with the numbers they are supporting, and needs in terms of volunteers, support services etc so that all are kept up to date in terms of needs that others might be able to help with, such as volunteers, and information such as new benefits etc that can be applied for. This has been a very positive and far reaching support network and continues to provide and be flexible according to current needs. This week, the Food bank reported in that they are currently providing 125 food boxes each week, which Food in Community help provide food for, Riverford Field kitchen (and other local commercial kitchens) supply free cooked meals to go into, Bob the Bus deliver some of the Food Boxes and provide transport for people (who are shielding) to go for vaccinations,

and Totnes Caring coordinate volunteers to assist vulnerable people across the area. Leatside surgery report in on the vaccination programme with information that can be passed to Totnes Caring clients. A very proactive and positive network that it is a privilege to attend and support.

A new initiative has been proposed **to provide donated cook books in with each of the food boxes** – if you have a cook book that you would like to donate please contact me and I'll pass it on.

Totnes Fair Trade group – It is Fair Trade Fortnight at present – please purchase Fair Trade goods

Totnes Skate Park – the plans for the new Skatepark have been submitted to SHDC for planning approval. Progress!



Planting the Parish and Town Boundaries

Tree Planting our Town and Parish Boundaries – a proposal for a new Wildlife Corridor

At the highly successful and inspiring Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Planning week in November 2019, a session was held to discuss promoting tree planting with a view to reducing carbon in the atmosphere and increasing habitats for wildlife. The idea for replanting the town and parish boundaries with new trees was put forward and the idea seems to have caught on.

The proposal is that each town or parish council starts planting trees on their boundary with their neighbouring parish. The neighbouring parishes in turn also do this. If successful this would spread into a continuous network of trees that could eventually become a very long (and very much needed) new contiguous network of wildlife corridors across the South Hams, the South West, the UK. Only the sea is the limit.

An obvious issue might occur where private property sits on the boundary. If this is a rural spot the landowner can be contacted and will hopefully give permission for trees to be planted (Parish boundaries generally follow / are followed by old field boundaries on natural geographical boundaries). If the boundary is on a private garden, then the owner can be asked if they would like to participate in the project and if the space is too small for trees, then smaller (ideally native) shrubs could be planted instead to keep the corridor intact. If a permanent building is in the way then unfortunately that will mean a gap in the corridor, but hopefully not too big or impossible to bridge or work around one way or another.

The beating of the bounds has been a longstanding tradition in the UK and a revival of this annual event could provide the opportunity for an annual maintenance and health check on the trees already planted and each year add a more trees until the boundary is complete. With the old traditional event including an annual meeting of the neighbouring parishioners across the bounds, this would be an opportunity to do this annual check-up with the 'neighbours'.

Some parish boundaries are a lot longer than others and some can be topographically very challenging. It therefor makes sense to keep each parishes annual planting target to a doable amount building on the previous totals, possibly using social targets such as:

- Year 1 – 1 tree for each neighbouring parish (=5 for Totnes)
 - Year 2 – (building on the previous number) 1 tree for every household in the town / parish (~4,500)
 - Year 3 – (ditto) 1 tree for every resident in the town/parish (~ 8,200)
 - Year 4 – an extra tree for very new baby born that year etc, etc
- (And so on until the wildlife corridor has been established)

To get the project underway this year, the proposal for this planting season 2021 is as follows:

1. Plant one oak tree on each section of the town boundary where a neighbouring parish adjoins:
2. For Totnes this means 5 oak trees along the sections of the town boundary with:
 - Dartington
 - Littlehempston
 - Berry Pomeroy
 - Ashprington
 - Harberton
3. Establish a group of volunteers to carry out the scheme in the town/parish
4. Make contact with each of the neighbouring parishes and ask them to join the scheme and arrange to plant oak trees along their parish boundary this planting season too
5. Use a high resolution map to identify the parish boundary
6. Identify suitable sites to plant the first trees- ideally on public open space
7. Let each neighbouring parish know exactly where the trees are to be planted on the boundary
8. Invite each Parish Council to attend the tree planting being hosting and invite them to plant an oak tree close by on the parish boundary at the same time. Invite the Mayor/PC Chairperson to officiate
9. Encourage the neighbouring parish councils to continue the project with their other parish neighbours too.
10. Keep a record of the planting, take photos and tell residents and publicise that this has been done.

Future years & planting seasons

- Plan further planting of the boundary
- Plan the public open space plantings as above
- Make contact with the owners of land which is on or adjoins the boundary.
- Seek permission to plant trees or ask them if they would be willing to do this.
- For private gardens also ask the owners if they would like to participate in the scheme and plant trees or shrubs themselves as part of the wildlife corridor
- Keep records, map the planting and celebrate along the way

Other considerations – before planting the trees

- Stewardship, maintenance and liability for each tree planted needs to be established
- Public liability insurance needs to be in place for tree planting events

Final thoughts

- Rope in as many people as you can to get the project established asap – biodiversity and wildlife are in crisis
- Let everyone know you are doing this and encourage them to join in and do additional planting where possible
- Invite someone to estimate how many tonnes of carbon you are removing from the atmosphere with each tree planted (e.g. 1 hectare of woodland can take up 400 tonnes of carbon - <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/how-trees-fight-climate-change/>)

These are the proposals for Totnes Town Boundary – this planting season.



