

Happy New Year! Overall it was quiet over the Christmas period but it is busy again now as we have started setting the Budget for the next financial year. the main updates from DCC:

### **Covid update**

Covid rates are falling across all Devon Districts at present and amongst all age groups with the exception of young children (pre-school/primary school age).

Hospital rates have been rising slowly since beginning of January and as of yesterday stood at 226 within the whole of Devon. North Devon Hospital is currently at 16 inpatients which is a slight rise over the past week. However, the good news is that numbers in ICU are falling, currently at 5 within Devon and none in North Devon.

We are seeing infection cases within workplaces, education, and health and care settings with 20-39 years having the highest rates although as said these are falling. Within Great Torrington we have seen quite a few cases in Bluecoat primary school which may explain the higher case rates within the town. In the rest of Torridge District infection rates are falling sharply, and in the 'Winkleigh & High Bickington' MSOA which covers Petrockstowe, the infection rate is 312.4 which is the lowest in Torridge and the second lowest across all of Devon.

The key public health messages remain the same; **get vaccinated**, lateral flow test regularly, hands face space.

The good news is that the booster jab roll out has gone well in Devon. **Around 85% of eligible people in Devon have had a booster. And 93% of people aged 12 and above have had at least one dose.**

Regarding testing, there is now a change in policy if you have no symptoms and test positive via a lateral flow test, you need to isolate, you do not get a PCR anymore. If you test negative on day 6 and day 7 you no longer need to isolate.

If you do have symptoms, then you need to isolate and get a PCR test.

### Non Covid Matters

**Budget Preparations** – Budget setting has begun at DCC. There will be an uplift in overall funding for Children's and Adult Social Care services, along with a small increase for Highways, but it is likely to be a tight budget overall. Draft Budgets are now being presented to the Council's Scrutiny Committees, before final approval by Full Council in February.

**Torrington Work Hub** – The new Work Hub in Torrington is now 'operational' with a soft opening with people using the space for the next few weeks to give feedback on what works best and what will need improving. The Omicron wave and 'Plan B' has seen the official opening postponed but despite the immediate challenges with Covid, I believe this will be a great asset for the Town and the wider rural area and I am delighted this project has come to fruition.

**Free school meal vouchers doubled for Christmas** - DCC doubled the value of supermarket vouchers for families with children on free school meals from £15 a week to £30 a week for the Christmas holidays. Families received £60 voucher per child for the two-weeks to help with the additional financial pressures the festive period can bring.

**Appreciative Inquiry into Adult Social Care and support for staff** – DCC held a unique event celebrating the Adult Social Care sector when it held a conference that brought together leading national and local figures with care workers and providers to discuss adult social care. The Inquiry is being held to celebrate the incredible work being done by the 30,000 care workers in Devon who support vulnerable people and promote their independence on a daily basis. But it also aims to raise awareness of the acute challenges now faced by the industry, and identify recommendations that will help secure and improve its future, and realise its full potential. I look forward to reading the Inquiry's findings in due course.

Also on Adult Social Care, over Christmas there was further support given by DCC to staff and carers working in Adult Social Care, with £3m for domiciliary care staff and £5.3m to help support independent sector residential and nursing care workers. The funding comes from the Government, and NHS Devon has also contributed to the one-off funding package.

**Launch of Devon's £9.3m Community Renewal Fund programme** – As previously reported, DCC was successful in securing this funding from the Government, with the funding supporting 13 innovative projects over the next 6 months including a range of employment and training, environmental and community investment across Devon through to mid-2022.

Projects supported include:

- £1.35m awarded to the Biosphere Foundation to take forward a mixed programme of economic and environmental development activity, seeking to build upon opportunities across Northern Devon's unique marine and rural environment to generate sustainable jobs, industries and investment.
- £1m awarded to PETROC College for two programmes of activity; promoting business innovation and development through new digital technologies; and taking forward additional youth and community activity across Northern Devon, with a focus on working with those harder to reach in rural and coastal communities.
- £2.76m awarded to Devon County Council for four projects, including grant activity to support diversification in the agricultural sector, support for the development of digital skills among harder to reach communities, a delegated grant programme to support business innovation among small businesses in Devon, and additional support to assist those with a disability to access employment.

**Open Up to Skills initiative launched** – A new initiative is being launched to provide training opportunities for people working in Devon's catering, hospitality, leisure, retail and tourism sectors. The "Open Up To Skills" project will support 700 additional training places to improve workforce skills and will also benefit businesses within these sectors as part of Devon County Council's economic recovery response to the coronavirus pandemic. More information online here - ["Open Up To Skills" initiative launched - News \(devon.gov.uk\)](#)

I hope this update is useful. As ever, if there is anything you need me to look into locally please get in touch.