Ways to tackle housing crisis

LIKE it or not, thousands more houses will be built in Torridge and North Devon over the next few years.

This is not a choice being made by our current district councils, who are responsible for dealing with any planning applications. It's down to targets set by national government.

Quite rightly, this has got large numbers of people highly alarmed, especially as ministers are also proposing to scrap district councils in a shake-up of local government, meaning decisions affecting our area could be made by a new unitary authority miles away in Exeter.

There are three particular concerns. One is the rate at which green fields are being gobbled up by new homes. Two is a fear that most of these houses won't be affordable for locals. Three is that our existing infrastructure - roads, health services, schools, sewers etc - can't cope as it is.

Councils cannot turn down planning applications based on these concerns. When an application comes before a council, the presumption is it will be approved unless there are grounds to refuse it. Legally, those grounds do not include potholes in the local roads, overloaded sewers or a lack of dentists.

If councils turn down planning applications for the wrong reasons, developers can take them to court. And it's council tax payers who will then end up paying for all the legal costs.

Even before last year's general election, Torridge and North Devon were obliged to allocate land for hundreds of new houses. If they hadn't, it would have been even easier for developers to build wherever they wanted. Now, the Labour government has increased those housing targets. Figures from the BBC show that over the next few years, Torridge is going to have to allocate space for 526 new houses per year (up from 306). North Devon's target is 806 (up from 522).

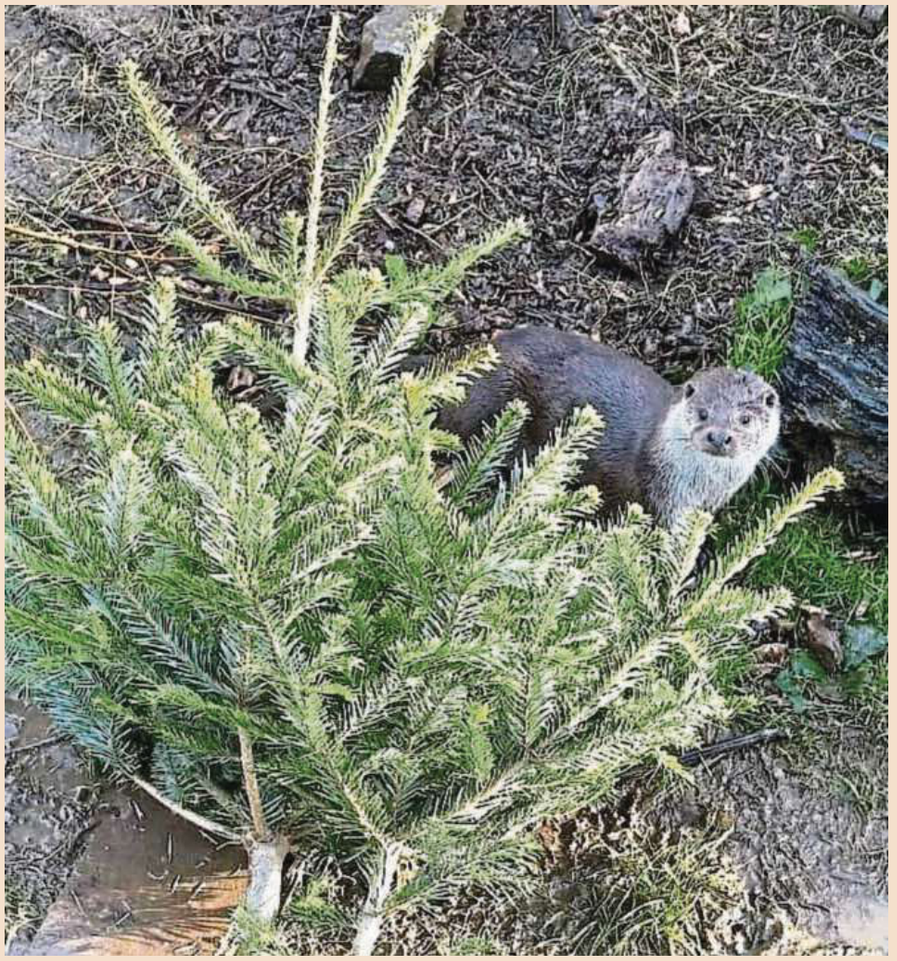
It's a crazy system. I agree we probably need new houses. But they should meet local needs and be affordable for local people. Building houses for the sake of meeting arbitrary targets might keep big developers happy but it won't solve any of our problems.

We need to tackle infrastructure first. We need to stop ripping up our countryside. We need homes that are affordable on the average (low) wages being paid in northern Devon. Crucially, we need to build homes that are future-proofed against climate change and that people can afford to run.

And councillors, based locally, should have the power to turn down planning applications for houses that don't meet our needs.

Huw Thomas, Green Party
Bideford East ward
Torridge District Council

Utter otter joy



Otter cubs in North Devon are thriving thanks to a unique form of enrichment; donated Christmas trees. The UK Wild Otter Trust, based in Umberleigh, has received over 160 natural trees from the public after a festive appeal, transforming the cubs' environment and stimulating their senses. The trust, dedicated to rescuing and rehabilitating abandoned and injured otter cubs from all over the UK, thanked people who generously contributed their trees after the holiday season. The trust told the Gazette: "It turns out the otter cubs at the charity absolutely love them. The trees provide an exciting play area for the cubs and help stimulate their senses through their textures and smells." Picture: UK Wild Otter Trust

Support our farmers

IT seems to be that increasingly everything in farming is decided by rent extortion and endless upward speculation in land prices driven by people for whom a high proportion of food self-sufficiency in the UK is not really a consideration.

The only outcome of this will be to drive out the family farm as owner occupiers or even tenants. This process is not related to food prices, i.e. those that the supermarket buyers will pay to the farmers supplying bulk agricultural commodities.

The previous government seized on the Brexit vote to decimate the relatively benign EU policies, which were generally beneficial to the UK farmers and food exporters and indeed the wider economy. By contrast, the Asia-Pacific treaty is worth less than 0.1 per cent of the UK economy. Europe, as the near continent, was worth many times that.

Tory trade secretaries enabled Australian farmers to eat the UK farmers' lunch. They gave away a 10,000 ton cod quota off Norway for 500 tons they may catch off the UK coast. UK tax policies must support and favour the UK's family farms.

AD Gill
Ashford

Safety crusader

"WE would suggest that any requests for speed limits in Barnstaple should be raised with the Town Council so they can consider them when the county council next invites requests for the 20mph scheme." (*Toby takes write approach in campaign for road safety, North Devon Gazette, January 8*).

What a woeful response from Devon County Council to a young resident's initiative to improve pedestrian safety on the roads surrounding his home and school.

Instead of welcoming eight-year-old Toby Norris's proposal for a 15mph speed limit, this is the desiccated, bureaucratic reaction he receives! There will be local politicians bemoaning the time children spend on screens but when Toby demonstrates that he's an active part of his neighbourhood, alert to local conditions endangering and discouraging children from walking to school, this is the best they can come up with. Shameful!

So a little primer for the county-hall decision-makers:

1 — At traffic speeds of 30–40 mph, the risks of pedestrian fatalities are 3.5–5.5 times greater than at speeds of 20–30 mph, which is why schemes to reduce road speed have become increasingly popular in the UK and parts of Europe (*Sustrans, October 2023*)

2 — 20mph speed limits also reduce the volume of traffic using those roads, thereby inducing a further reduction in the likelihood of fatal and serious injury incidents.

In dismissing Toby's proposal, the countycouncil claims that 'only the Central ward in Barnstaple scored high enough to be included in its next tranche of [20mph] schemes', but fails to supply any criteria used to reach this decision. Let's hope political shenanigans played no part - DCC is Tory-run, Barnstaple part of Lib Dem-run North Devon Council.

What's clear from the 169 submissions the county council says it received in support of 20mph schemes is that there's a widespread desire for lower speed limits across the county. The Devon-wide electorate is clearly letting its political masters know where it stands on this matter.

Toby Norris deserves congratulations from Barnstaple and North Devon residents for his active citizenship and showing the way forward for improved road safety/active travel, particularly around schools where some of the most vulnerable residents live - and how right he is. On January 10 emergency services were called to Bear Street in Barnstaple after a camper van collided with a wall and overturned (*North Devon Gazette*).

Footnote: Devon currently has eight district councils - of which NDC is one - but proposals to merge these with DCC into a unitary authority are active. Transport matters need to be top of the agenda.

Meg Howarth
London

Democracy first

DEVON county councillors decided earlier this month to postpone the elections due on May 1 for two years.

Their justification is that experienced councillors like them are required to sort out the local government reorganisation required by Westminster - rather than leaving it to newbies.

I can see why they think that but surely it should be up to the electorate to decide who it wants - experienced old hands or the new intake who will actually have to make the changed structure work. Let's have genuine democracy please.

Cllr Mark Haworth-Booth
Landkey ward, Swimbridge