

Business leaders from a wide range of Devon companies and organisations gathered recently at a joint celebration of the Queen's Awards for Enterprise and the Devon Delivers Ambassadors' programme organised by the Devon Lieutenancy.

Alongside the Devon Delivers Ambassadors, businesses that attended included Dartington Crystal, TDK Lambda, British Ceramic Tiles, Midas, PKF Francis Clark, Michelmores, as well as organisations like the Heart of the South West LEP, UKTI, Devon and Cornwall Business Council, Institute of Directors and Devon Chamber of Commerce.

There's been a significant rise in the number of people with learning disabilities gaining paid employment thanks largely to supported internship programmes like the Barnstaple Project SEARCH. Nationally less than 7 per cent of people with learning disabilities are in any form of paid work, compared to 73 per cent of the wider population.

Barnstaple's Project SEARCH launched in 2013 with Council funding, and is one of 38 Project SEARCH programmes in the UK. The programmes aim to increase people's employability, build confidence, develop life skills and encourage independence. An essential part of the programme is practical on-the-job training with an employer.

The programmes run over an academic year, during which time students work towards a City and Guilds Diploma in Employability and Personal Development. At the end of the year they are helped to find paid employment.

Since its launch the Barnstaple Project has helped nearly 80 percent of its students into paid employment or traineeship and was the highest achieving of all the programmes in the country.

Councils across Devon and Somerset have been reassured that their devolution proposals do not require an elected mayor. At a recent summit meeting with council leaders, Local Government Secretary Greg Clark said Government would not impose an elected Mayor as part of any Heart of the South West (HotSW) Devolution Partnership deal.

New powers would instead be overseen by a Combined Authority consisting of representatives of Devon and Somerset county councils, Plymouth and Torbay councils, the 13 district councils in the two counties and Dartmoor and Exmoor national parks. The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) would also have a non-voting seat on the Combined Authority.

Leaders of the councils and partners have already backed the plan. Each authority will now be asked to formally sign-up to the principle of creating a Combined Authority which would allow the negotiations towards a deal to move forward.

At Cabinet last week Members discussed the Bid and decided to move forward with creating a Combined Authority – my Group called the decision in.

Finally at Cabinet last week members discussed new proposals to abrogate all responsibility for transport costs for post 16 students. The Cabinet decided to insist that schools pay for transport to school, college and training institutions for all students of 16 and over, regardless of their family's ability to pay. Even disabled children will now have to pay a minimum of £560 to get to school. This will mean that much of the school transport will now have empty seats, hard pressed parents in rural locations will be forced to decide between getting themselves to work or getting their children to school. I along with other horrified Lib Dem colleagues have called this callous decision in and it will now be discussed in Committee and hopefully in the Media.