

County Councillor Report - March – Councillor Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin

January and February have been significant months for Devon. Devon County Council has now agreed its 2026–27 budget, our first full budget under the new administration, setting a clear direction: stabilising essential services, starting to repair what has been neglected, and investing in the foundations that keep our rural communities moving. [Devon Council spending plans for next year with nearly 5 per cent tax increase - Yahoo News UK](#)

£19 Million Extra for Highways Including £4 Million for Drainage and Gullies

The condition of Devon's roads remains one of the biggest concerns for residents, especially after the severe storms and freeze thaw damage we have faced this winter.

I'm sure you will all be pleased to hear this year's budget includes £19 million of **additional** highways funding, with £4 million of this ringfenced specifically for drainage and gullies. Improving drainage is one of the most effective forms of preventative work. When water is allowed to sit on or under the surface, roads deteriorate rapidly. This investment will support more ditching, gully clearing and preventative work, helping reduce future potholes and protect new resurfacing work. There are also plans to work more closely with town and parish councils on highways issues over the coming years through a "Community Protocol", strengthening local input and collaboration.

The reality is that it would take hundreds of millions of pounds to bring Devon's roads up to standard because they are now in such a poor condition, after more than a decade of decline and underfunding. However, I sincerely hope the £19M increase in funding this year will deliver noticeable improvements. Let's all hope for some drier weather and progress on the ground.

As the weather improves, highways teams will move from winter emergency response into planned resurfacing and extensive drainage work. Please continue reporting problems, the easiest way to do this is through the "DCC- report a problem" website; your reports directly help prioritise work. [Report a problem - Roads and transport](#)

Protecting Essential Services

Despite huge funding pressures, (and National Government not properly recognising the impacts of Devon being a huge rural county and the significant increased costs of delivering services compared to urban areas), Devon County Council has delivered a balanced budget for the year ahead. The budget was approved unanimously by Council, with 52 votes in favour, 2 abstentions and 0 against. This strong level of support demonstrates the shared commitment across the council to prioritise essential services and ensure long term financial stability.

Adult social care represents nearly half of the Council's total spend, and demand continues to rise as Devon has one of the oldest populations in the UK. The budget aims to stabilise and modernise services while maintaining dignity and independence for those who rely on support.

There has also been major national news for children's services and SEND. The Government has confirmed it will write off around 90% of councils' historic SEND deficits, including 90% of Devon's £200 million High Needs overspend. This deficit was not caused by local overspending; councils were required to support children's needs even as national funding fell behind. The write off essentially corrects a long-standing national funding gap, but nonetheless the news was a very welcome relief. [Most of Devon County Council £200m SEND debt cleared - BBC News](#)

Libraries, Community Investment and Locality Funding

The response to the recent Devon Libraries consultation has been nothing short of incredible. More than 25,000 residents took part, which is around four times more than the last major library consultation. This shows just how much our communities value their libraries. Libraries, especially in rural areas, are warm hubs, digital access points, advice centres, learning spaces and vital community meeting places, going far beyond the statutory book-lending service.

It is taking some time to input the consultation responses as we received thousands that were handwritten. We will need time to properly consider and analyse the data which we are hoping will be published later in the spring. As cabinet member with responsibility for libraries, I have been attending many community meetings as part of the consultation, and the message from the public has been very clear: residents truly value these spaces and want their libraries protected. I am really pleased that the Council will be keeping the library budget the same as last year at just over £7M, with an extra £1M set aside to invest in genuine transformation of libraries and community-led improvements. We will be working together with all council members to develop a vision and strategy. [Devon libraries budget sees surprise plot twist in new funding reversal - North Devon Today](#)

I also want to highlight the great success of the new Youth Grant "Places to go, things to do". All £160,000 was allocated in the form of small grants right across Devon. It was so successful that I am pleased to say we are continuing with it this year. It has been brilliant to see new youth groups form and to be able to support more activities for our young people, especially in areas where they are a long way from any kind of youth centre.

Locality (community) budgets are also increasing, with each County Councillor receiving £10,000 from April to fund projects specifically within their area, supporting community organisations. These small grants can make a really big difference at parish level, supporting a range of initiatives, from youth work, events, equipment, to accessibility improvements.

Rail Investment and The Tarka Line

Last week, I attended the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) Rail Convention, where one of the key priorities was for urgent upgrades and modernisation to the Tarka Line. This rail route is vital for our rural economy, education, commuting and connectivity, yet it continues to suffer from reliability issues and outdated infrastructure.

[North Devon rail: Stakeholders meet to discuss future of Tarka Line - North Devon Today](#)

Our petition, taken to Parliament by Ian Roome MP, has already received encouraging responses from ministers and National Rail. We are determined to keep up the pressure for proper long-term investment in the line. [Tarka Line rail investment petition handed to Parliament - BBC News](#)

Broadband

There is finally some real progress being made in relation to broadband and Project Gigabit. I have for months requested meetings with government ministers, and last month had an online meeting with Programme Director Andrew Field from Building Digital UK (BDUK). I have also been working with Devon MPs, and the government have now reopened the voucher scheme for suppliers. We are currently looking at which areas are best placed to use these, with the voucher deadline being August. We are working with Devon MPs cross-party seeking a joint meeting with the government minister to discuss the rural connectivity gap, the day to day challenges it creates, and further solutions to help ensure no community is left behind. I will update when I have more information.

Visit to Great Torrington School

It was a pleasure to be invited in as part of GTS Alumni to talk to year 9 students about life after Great Torrington School! I think I spoke more about travelling and teaching English abroad than I did about being a councillor- and I'm very proud of myself for not mentioning the P word once (potholes!!!). I emphasised how you can never be sure what the future holds and you can never be sure of what you will end up doing. I never considered myself to be interested in politics when I was growing up and I don't think I even knew what a councillor was when I was at school! I always hated public speaking and I still get nervous now! I hope I managed to get across the importance of doing things that you care about to help your community, to live a wholesome life and for everyone to know that they can make a difference. These pupils are our hope and our future and I hope some future young councillors too!

Cheryl
Cllr Cheryl Cottle Hunkin
County Councillor for Torrington Rural Division

District Councillor Report – March - Councillor Chris Wheatley

The Taw and Torridge River Champions (TTRC) meeting took place on Saturday 7th March from 10am at the Lib Dem office at Chingswell Street then onto Kenwith Stream and carry out our water quality tests for our database and nature statistics. No doubt some of you have seen the excellent channel 4 3-part series entitled Dirty Works. It is available to stream on Channel 4 and is an eye opener and a must watch! There has been much media and public awareness of the current plight of the awful state of our rivers, streams, estuaries, beaches and coastline and the need to get it cleaned up! I am in the process of collating some data and information reference sewage spillages in Petrockstowe area near Oaklands regarding Oaklands Combined Sewage Overflow (CSO) which carries discharges of a mixture of wastewater and rainwater typically prevent sewage backing up to homes. The receiving water body is a tributary of Little Mere River then runs into the River Torridge near Beaford. The overflow Southwest Water ID: SWW0833 has experienced 9 events this year. Petrockstowe STW (Sewage Treatment Work) is located approximately halfway between Oaklands and Petrockstowe Cricket Club. The receiving water body is also a tributary of the Little Mere River then runs into the River Torridge near Beaford. Southwest Water ID:SWW0894 from 13/12/2025 to had experienced 66 events/sewage to date. It's encouraging that we are making some progress yet there is still much to be done! The next meeting of TTRC in April to be confirmed.

The present situation with ongoing recycle vehicle spillages appears to be less frequent for now! We are continuing to monitor some of the lanes particularly along hedge and roadsides in Petrockstowe, Newton St Petrock and Merton.

We are continuing to see improvements and please either contact me if there are future spillages or report to the Waste/Recycling Team on the Council. Fortunately, the new operations centre where our bins, recycling vehicles and street cleaning are based is now operational in Bideford OSCAR - (Operational Services Centre, Alverdiscott Road).

The staff and working conditions have improved greatly at OSCAR.

No 4 The Square - I received an update from Olly Kearney who informed me that Lisa Steven's (Neighbourhood Officer) will be attending the property regarding a separate complaint of possible pest infestation. Olly is working on to build his case and shall be contacting the immediate neighbours (3 and 5 The Square) over the next couple of weeks to arrange inspection of the premises working with Lisa Stevens. Olly is working to contact the owner of the property. Please bear in mind this case could take a long time to resolve.

FULL COUNCIL

I attended the Full Council Meeting where the Torridge District Council Climate commitments were on the agenda and initially, we had three public speakers and a presentation from our Climate and Sustainability Officer who presented the Report to review progress of the Councils climate commitments and ambitions. There then followed a debate with questions and comments. It was eventually agreed to update the Councils target to be NET ZERO by 2030 and to reduce our carbon footprint from a practical perspective whilst balancing priorities that are important to residents. Funding targets may not be met due to significant funding requirements though likely offset by renewable energy incomes and savings.

A vote took place and was carried For - 21, Against - 6 and Abstention -1.

FULL COUNCIL - BUDGET SPECIAL MEETING

I attended the Budget Special Meeting where we discussed and voted for £70,000 for planting trees on TDC land. Sites identified by treeconomics are Bideford, Bradworthy, Holsworthy and Northam. Fortunately, the vote though very close was FOR by one vote and carried and very pleased this goes ahead at the following locations-

Bideford - Abbotsham road, Chudleigh Fort, Ford Rise, Oaklands, Pollyfield Skate park, Victoria Park, East- of-the -Water and Higher cemetery.

Bradworthy - Tuckers Park

Holsworthy - Holsworthy cemetery

Northam - Great Barrow Road.

Additionally on the Agenda was -

Budget 2026/2027 Financial Strategy

Council Tax Resolution

Capital Programs

Treasury Management Report and Capital Strategy

Pay Policy

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

As a reminder All Parishes should have received the link to the government website via Gov Delivery reference LGR public consultation which is open until 26th March 2026 and provides links for people to respond.