

District Councillor Report – July – Cllr Wheatley

The Devon Parish Pothole Handbook from Devon County Council has become available and will bring your Parish handbook along with me for the Parish Meeting. I would like to ask the Parish to consider and subscribe to the DCC Road Warden Scheme to equip, train and insure small volunteer teams. The Pothole Handbook is comprehensive and covers other areas including reporting issues with Grit bins, overgrown vegetation, Public rights of way, Broken inspection covers, Debris or obstructions, Bridges and retaining walls, Flooding, drainage issues. There are QR Codes in the handbook with quick access to the topic you require i.e. using a smart phone.

Reporting Potholes is categorised as **Defect Potholes** - Highways FIX THESE minimum 40 mm deep and minimum 300mm in length with a vertical edge after being reported where each report is allocated a reference number and an Inspector is sent to the location and determine its one for DCC to fix it and the speed of the fix is determined by the safety risk of causing an immediate accident. Add your name to the defective Pothole and don't report it again as this will generate a new reference number and confuse the process.

Non-defect Potholes - should be reported to your Parish Council and the Clerk records the Reports on the Parish and full Agenda item and used to update the Parish Priorities List. Road Warden minimum 40mm and minimum of 400mm in length with a sloping edge. This could be a pin board inviting Parishioners to locate potholes on a map- DCC.

The Parish Road Wardens will undergo training and provided with necessary materials. Parish Road Wardens may not carry out the work yet is responsible for coordinating the works that take place. and can have a small team of volunteers who carry out the Works who also must undergo training and qualification requirements.

Road Wardens and Parish Council working in partnership with Devon County Council.

See also enhanced Road Warden Scheme, Paid Parish Lengthsman and Pothole Ninjas in Handbook.

To download a copy of the Devon Parish Pothole Handbook please go to louise4devon.com and select potholes and scroll down to New Potholes Handbook for Parish Councils to Download Latest Version here

Torridge District Council - Councillors attended a Member Briefing Meeting with XLinks recently on 22nd June 2026 where we first became aware of XLinks proposed Torrington AI Data Centre/Campus and storage for nearby Torrington. We received an update letter from XLinks regarding the AI Data Centre/Campus. XLinks have stated that the consultation has been extended however no new dates for the drop-in days yet. The PIDS (Public Information days) has been put back to allow more time.

It is envisaged that XLinks are to submit their Planning Applications in the New Year for the data centre and battery BESS storage. The potential sheer size is huge with an 850-acre agricultural site consisting of AI data centre known as Valeon with 1.5GW of compute capacity with 5 massive buildings each rising up to 40 metres high (130 feet) and a 1.8GW battery energy storage system (BESS) with 2700 containers covering 96 acres. This means that it would be among the largest AI facilities in Europe and tenth largest in the World based on Developers estimates.

To give another perspective on size-

Battery Storage - 47 football pitches in size
Data Centre - 235 football pitches in size

There are many more questions to be answered along with details regarding the Data Centre and Storage. The potential sheer size and other many other factors are of concern including excessive water usage, noise, light, security, electric/ energy consumption, and fire risks. Productive prime farmland and an ecological paradise lost. Already there is much community and public objection to the XLinks proposal including a petition gaining over 24,500+ signatures.

The Government has released LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION for Devon confirming four unitary authorities consisting of Exeter, Plymouth, Torbay and Devon Coast and Countryside. Further information about implementation arrangements to be provided as the program progresses.

FULL COUNCIL

At our recent full council meeting we received a presentation from Nick Brewer - Future Hospital Associate Programme Officer regarding the estate development at the Barnstaple Hospital site.

Phase1 - Munro and Chichester House to be demolished and replaced with 120 modern en-suite accommodation costing £22.7 million.

Phase 2- Demolition and renewing of the rest of the accommodation block to enable development of a new staff car park.

Phase 3- Reorganisation and rationalisation of the main hospital site.

It was confirmed that the Bideford Hospital had received £6 million from NHS England for a CDC (Community Diagnostics Centre) and Community Regeneration Partnership Funding to deliver a health and well-being Hub and with details of proposed provision.

Two New Deputy Leaders Appointments

Councillor Hudson and Councillor Tinsley were appointed and voted for by Council as Deputy Leaders

External Overview Scrutiny Committee Report- Railway Futures Ltd was presented to Council to take the final steps and after much discussion and debate it was **rejected by one vote!** 15 against and 14 for with the chair casting the decisive vote after some members said it indicated a negative tone and concern the message it would send.

1 - TDC should concentrate efforts to improve connectivity by looking at cheaper and more immediate measures such as a fast coach service linking Bedford and Tiverton Parkway railway station and/or London as proposed with the Bideford Regeneration Plan

2- TDC should develop a comprehensive more Active Travel network providing greater opportunities for cyclists and walkers to access the centre of Bideford from the various new developments around the Town and surrounding communities such as Northam and Westward Ho!

3 -TDC should prioritise looking to improve public transport links between Bideford and other Towns, villages, and rural communities within the District.

4- Although rails travel is greener than car travel to Exeter improving facilities locally would be better for the environment and local economy.

LICENSING COMMITTEE

We are pleased to announce a License was approved for the historic Black Horse Inn in Torrington in the main square.

The premises have been closed sometime and the applicants met TDC officers and the Police with a positive outcome.

The pub must undergo some work before opening, and will support local suppliers, create employment and a safe venue along with working with the local community.

County Councillor Report – Torrington Rural Division – Cllr

Cottle-Hunkin (report received on 27/07/26 – too late for Parish Councillors to ask questions)

Report to Town and Parish Councils – July 2026

Dear Colleagues, I wanted to provide an update on several significant issues affecting our communities across Torrington Rural, including recent Devon County Council Cabinet decisions, the proposed Devon Data Campus near Great Torrington, and the Government's Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) decision.

Local Government Reorganisation – Government Decision Announced

The biggest piece of local government news is the Government's decision on the future structure of local government in Devon.



On 16 July 2026, the Government confirmed that the current two-tier system of Devon County Council and District Councils will be replaced by **four new unitary authorities**. The model chosen was based on proposals submitted by Exeter and Plymouth City Councils.

What does this mean?

Under the new arrangements:

- Devon County Council will eventually cease to exist.
- District councils, including Torridge District Council, will also be abolished.
- A new **Devon Coast and Countryside** unitary authority will be created covering the majority of rural Devon, including Torridge.
- Expanded unitary authorities will also be created for Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay.
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What happens next?

The Government has made it clear that:

- There will be no immediate changes to local services.
- Detailed transition planning will now begin.
- Elections to the new authorities are expected in 2027.
- The new councils are anticipated to become fully operational in 2028.

Devon Local Government Reorganisation: Elections Roadmap

A clear timeline of key milestones, elections, the pre-election period and vesting day

i Status note: items marked expected / indicative remain subject to the Government decision and the Structural Changes Order (SCO).



What does this mean for Torrington Rural?

There is still much detail to be worked through, but parish councils should be aware that:

- Services currently split between Devon County Council and Torridge District Council will eventually be delivered by a single authority.
- There will be important discussions about local representation, service delivery, assets, staffing and community engagement.
- It will be vital that rural communities continue to have a strong voice during the transition process.

As your County Councillor, I will continue advocating for effective representation of our rural communities and ensuring that parish councils are fully engaged as plans develop.

My Concerns About the Government's Decision

I am deeply disappointed by the Government's decision to adopt the Exeter and Plymouth proposal. Of all the options put forward for Devon, I believe this is by far the worst outcome for Torridge and many rural communities across the county.

I was outraged by the Government's announcement, which appeared to focus almost exclusively on the benefits for Plymouth and Exeter whilst giving insufficient consideration to the needs and challenges of rural Devon. In my opinion, the Government has failed to properly represent the interests of the many people who live, work and run businesses in our rural communities.

Distance and Accessibility

The proposed Devon Coast and Countryside authority covers a huge geographical area with no urban centre. Travel times from the furthest north to south and west to east parts of the authority could exceed two hours.

Financial Pressures

Although the Devon Coast and Countryside authority may have the largest population of the four new unitaries, it will also inherit by far the largest rural road network (5,000 miles to maintain).

As we all know, many of these roads are already deteriorating before our eyes, particularly those in the rural areas. I am concerned that residents in what includes some of the most deprived areas of the South West could face increasing council tax pressures as the new authority struggles to raise sufficient funding to maintain highways and essential infrastructure to an acceptable standard.

Lack of a Natural Administrative Centre

Unlike Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay, the new rural authority does not include a major urban hub which could naturally serve as its administrative base.

Questions remain about where the authority would be headquartered and whether significant expenditure may eventually be required to establish suitable offices or meeting facilities in a more central location. Taxpayers will rightly expect close scrutiny of any such costs.

Economic Consequences

Many of the most deprived communities in Devon are located within the proposed Devon Coast and Countryside authority.

By separating these communities from the county's two largest economic centres, there is a fear that opportunities linked to urban growth, investment and regeneration may become more difficult to access in the future.

Rural Representation

Above all, I am concerned that this model weakens the voice of rural Devon at a time when our communities already face significant challenges. It is vital that villages, market towns and farming communities are not overlooked during the transition process.

In summary, I have grave concerns that this version of Local Government Reorganisation will have significant negative ramifications for residents living within the proposed Devon Coast and Countryside authority. I will continue to challenge proposals where necessary and advocate strongly for the interests of rural Devon. The executive summary of the proposal selected by Government can be viewed here:

Exeter and Plymouth Joint Executive Summary:

<https://exeter.gov.uk/media/x1allonv/exeter-and-plymouth-joint-executive-summary-final.pdf>

Proposed Devon Data Campus and Battery Storage Site

Many constituents will already be aware of the emerging proposal from Xlinks for a large-scale AI data centre campus and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) between Great Torrington, Weare Giffard and Huntshaw.

According to information released by the developer, the project would occupy approximately 850 acres, with large data-centre warehouses 40m tall, extensive battery storage infrastructure (2,700 shipping containers) and associated facilities.

Community Concerns

Significant concerns have been raised by residents and local organisations regarding:

- Loss of productive agricultural land.
- Landscape and visual impact.
- Effects on biodiversity.
- Energy demand and grid capacity.
- Water usage.
- Public health concerns arising from noise and heat.
- Traffic impacts during construction and operation.
- The scale of development within a rural landscape and UNESCO Biosphere area.

Current Position

Importantly:

- No planning application has yet been submitted.
- Separate applications are expected for the data centre (outline planning) and battery storage facility (full planning).
- Public consultation events originally planned for July have been postponed by Xlinks and we are awaiting dates for further engagement.

My Position

I have been advised by some that, as a district and county councillor, I should remain neutral and sit on the fence until further information becomes available. However, having learned more about existing data centres and being told the scale of the proposal, I quickly came to the conclusion that I could not remain silent.

I am hugely concerned by what is being proposed and in my view, we already know enough to conclude that this is the wrong development in the wrong place.



The scale of this proposal cannot be overstated. If approved, the Devon Data Centre would be the biggest data centre development in Europe, alongside what would also be one of the largest Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) in the world. This is a proposal of unprecedented scale for rural Devon and is difficult to even comprehend,



It is bigger than the town of Great Torrington.

The proposal would remove 850 acres of productive agricultural land within a UNESCO Biosphere landscape. It includes areas of historic significance, including listed farmhouses, important wildlife habitats and land that contributes to our food security.

If a development of this scale can be built here, then it opens the door for similar developments almost anywhere in the country.

That is why I believe we must take a stand now. I cannot sit back and watch some of our most treasured landscapes being lost forever. The consequences of decisions like these are irreversible and irreparable. We must fight to protect our area, our communities and the countryside that makes North Devon and Torridge so special. Whilst I fully support investment, job creation and economic growth in Torridge, I remain wholly unconvinced that the claimed benefits outweigh the enormous impact this proposal would have on our communities, countryside, infrastructure and quality of life.

I will continue to work with residents, parish councils, campaign groups, our Member of Parliament and colleagues across all political parties to ensure this proposal receives the highest possible level of scrutiny and challenge.

I have already written to Government ministers and Devon MPs together with other county council cabinet members, raising concerns about the location of hyperscale AI infrastructure in rural areas and calling for Rural Impact Assessments to become a mandatory part of the decision-making process. I have also submitted a Parliamentary petition calling for an urgent moratorium on data centres and large-scale battery storage facilities outside designated AI Growth Zones. I am currently waiting to find out whether the petition has been accepted onto the gov.uk website before I can promote it.

Protecting rural communities and ensuring that national policy properly reflects rural realities will remain a key priority for me.

Transparency and Consultation

I am extremely disappointed that Xlinks chose to postpone its public information events at such short notice.

At a time when public concern is growing, this decision does little to inspire confidence and only reinforces the widespread feeling that local residents are not being properly informed.

It is absolutely essential that there is full disclosure of Xlinks' plans, together with a detailed explanation and evidence base for the claims and figures presented in the company's initial leaflet. Too many important questions remain unanswered.

I am increasingly concerned about the direction of travel from national Government regarding nationally significant infrastructure projects, particularly measures designed to accelerate approvals and reduce local influence. There is a growing

perception that the voices and needs of rural communities are being sidelined in pursuit of centrally imposed targets and priorities.

As always, I am willing to work constructively across party lines where it is in the interests of local residents. On this issue, I believe it is vital that we all work together to ensure this proposal is subjected to the highest possible level of scrutiny and that local people have a genuine opportunity to influence decisions that could fundamentally and permanently alter the character of our area.

Site Visit with Devon County Council Leader

I was delighted to welcome Devon County Council Leader Cllr Julian Brazil and Cabinet Member Cllr Denise Bickley to Great Torrington recently.

As well as visiting the primary school, it was a valuable opportunity to walk part of the public footpath network that leads directly into the centre of the proposed data centre site and to



drive around the wider development area, including the proposed 100-acre BESS site.

I would encourage anyone interested in these proposals to visit the area themselves (but make sure you stick to the public footpaths!). Standing within the landscape and seeing the panoramic views stretching from Dartmoor to the North Devon coast provides a valuable perspective on the scale of what is being proposed and why so many local people regard the location as wholly inappropriate.

Local Plan Consultation

A reminder that Torridge and North Devon Councils want to hear from residents, businesses and service providers.

What do you value about living here?

This is your opportunity to influence the future of the place we call home.

The first scoping consultation for the new Local Plan is now open and closes on **11 August 2026**.

<https://www.torridge.gov.uk/article/22565/Residents-invited-to-help-shape-new-local-plan-for-North-Devon-and-Torridge>

Biodiversity Recording

For anyone taking part in the Big Butterfly Count, please consider using the **iNaturalist** app to record your observations and locations.

It would also be extremely helpful if residents could use the app to record other wildlife, including bats, birds, insects and other species in and around the proposed data centre and BESS sites.

This information can help build a clearer picture of the biodiversity that exists within the area and could provide useful evidence about the environmental importance of the site.

Recent Devon County Council Cabinet Matters **Financial Stability and Transformation**

Cabinet has continued to monitor pressures in:

- Adult social care.
- Children's services.
- Home-to-school transport.
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Like many councils nationally, Devon continues to face increasing demand for statutory services, making long-term financial sustainability a major priority.

Roads and Infrastructure

Investment in Devon's highway network remains a priority, including:

- Road maintenance.
- Pothole repair programmes.
- Bridge maintenance.
- Active travel and transport initiatives.

These remain particularly important for rural areas where reliable transport links are essential for residents, businesses and farming communities.

Economy and Rural Communities

Cabinet has continued to support:

- Economic growth initiatives.
- Rural business development.
- Skills programmes.
- Infrastructure projects intended to improve connectivity and resilience across Devon.

What You Can Do

I strongly encourage all residents, businesses, farmers, community organisations, town councils and parish councils to make their voices heard.



The decisions currently being discussed, whether through Local Government Reorganisation or the proposed Devon Data Campus and Battery Energy Storage System, have the potential to shape the future of our area for generations to come. You can help by:

- Taking part in all future consultations and public engagement exercises.
- Responding to the North Devon and Torridge Local Plan consultation before **11 August 2026**.
- Attending public meetings and information events when they are announced.
- Encouraging neighbours, friends and family members to engage in the process.
- Recording local wildlife, habitats and biodiversity using the **iNaturalist** app and participating in initiatives such as the **Big Butterfly Count**.
- Sharing evidence about the environmental, agricultural, heritage and community value of the area.
- Contacting your local councillors, Member of Parliament and relevant decision-makers to ensure our voices are heard.
- Working constructively together across communities and political boundaries to protect what makes North Devon and Torridge special.

No one cares more about this area than the people who live and work here. If we do not speak up, others will make decisions on our behalf. Whether your concerns relate to the future of local government, the protection of our countryside, the preservation of productive farmland, or the character of our communities, now is the time to become involved.

The proposed Devon Data Campus would be the biggest data centre development in Europe and one of the largest battery storage developments in the world. If approved, it would permanently transform a significant area of rural North Devon. Equally, the decisions being taken through Local Government Reorganisation will have lasting consequences for how services are delivered and how rural communities are represented in the future.

Together, we can ensure that rural Devon is not overlooked and that the interests of our communities are properly represented in the decisions that will shape our future.

Supporting Our Rural Communities

The coming months will bring important discussions about both Local Government Reorganisation and major infrastructure proposals affecting North Devon and Torridge.

I know that many residents feel strongly about these issues, and rightly so.

My commitment remains to:

- Champion rural Devon.
- Protect productive farmland and our countryside.
- Ensure robust scrutiny of major developments.

- Maintain strong local representation throughout the reorganisation process.
- Work constructively with parish and town councils to secure the best possible outcomes for our communities.

If your council would like a further briefing on either the Local Government Reorganisation programme or the proposed Devon Data Centre, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am regularly posting on my councillor Facebook page, and this is a good place to go for updates too.

Kind regards,

Cllr Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin

Devon County Councillor – Torrington Rural Division

Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs

Devon County Council