

County Councillor Report – December 2025

Dear Parish Councillors,

As we move towards the end of the year, I want to thank you again for the diligence, challenge and community insight you bring to local decision-making. The past month has been shaped by significant work on Local Government Reorganisation, continued scrutiny across children's and adults' services, and several big, strategic decisions.

Local Government Reorganisation – Extraordinary Full Council

The extraordinary Full Council meeting in November marked another major step in the long and frustrating journey toward Local Government Reorganisation. Councillors held a detailed debate on the "One Devon" proposal before passing it to Cabinet for final agreement and submission to government.

This was not a rubber-stamping exercise. Members used the session to scrutinise the underlying financial modelling, governance design, rural impacts, and the capacity of the system to deliver safe services during transition. The meeting also highlighted a recurring theme: LGR is not something Devon asked for, nor does it stem from any structural failure locally. It is a process imposed on us by central government, and our responsibility is to mitigate harm while securing the best possible outcome for residents.

Key points discussed included:

- **Financial resilience and scale.** Modelling clearly demonstrates that large, county-wide structures reduce risk and protect core children's and adult services. Smaller unitaries, especially those mirroring current district footprints, carry significant financial exposure.
- **The role of Neighbourhood Committees.** While the One Devon model is far from anyone's ideal, the proposed Neighbourhood Committees present an opportunity for genuine localism. These bodies could bring together county councillors, parishes, schools, voluntary groups and health partners to shape local priorities with devolved budgets. If implemented well, they could strengthen local democracy rather than dilute it. This is the silver lining for me.
- **Rural representation.** The council was explicit that any future governance model must not sideline rural communities or concentrate decision-making in Exeter or other urban centres. This was one of the weaker aspects of some of the competing proposals submitted by Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay, which paid little regard to the rest of Devon.

The formal Cabinet decision now follows. I will continue pressing for transparency, proper consultation, and governance that gives rural Devon a strong voice.

Youth Voice Day

I was pleased to attend this year's **Youth Voice Saturday**, where young people from across Devon came together to discuss issues that matter to them and shape investment decisions through their *Places to Go, Things to Do* Fund.

What struck me most was the confidence and clarity with which young people articulated local needs: safe social spaces, accessible mental health support, better public transport, opportunities to develop skills, and places that feel genuinely welcoming to all young people. Their priorities were practical, grounded and far more thoughtful than many assume.

The youth panels are directly involved in allocating funding for projects in their communities. Decision-making sessions demonstrated a high level of scrutiny, fairness and compassion, often weighing up the needs of rural areas where provision is thinly spread. For parishes, this is an exciting reminder that youth consultation does not need to be tokenistic. When we give young people real power over budgets, they use it responsibly and imaginatively.

Several of the proposals discussed could have relevance to our division, particularly around transport barriers, shared community space, climate-friendly youth projects, and specialist support for isolated young people. I will continue to champion opportunities for our rural communities to benefit from this fund, and I am happy to speak with any parish interested in involving young people more directly in local planning or decision-making.

16 Days of Action – Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls

We are now in the annual **16 Days of Action** campaign, which focuses on ending violence and abuse against women and girls. Devon County Council, schools, charities and community organisations across the county are using the period to raise awareness, share resources and promote practical steps to keep people safe.

Early identification and local safeguarding is crucial. Many cases of abuse come to light through small local interactions: a neighbour's concern, something raised at a community group, or a school noticing a pattern. Rural communities play an outsized role in early safeguarding.

Misogyny and harassment are too often a gateway to more serious harm, evidence shows that normalised misogyny, both online and offline - feeds into wider patterns of

domestic abuse. This is a point I continue to make within the Children's Scrutiny Committee when we examine safeguarding frameworks and school culture.

Services are under pressure. Refuge spaces remain limited, mental health services for victims are stretched, and specialist support in rural areas is inconsistent. Campaigns like 16 Days help keep pressure on decision-makers to maintain investment in prevention, not just crisis response.

If parishes would like printed resources, awareness information or advice on local safeguarding pathways, please let me know and I will liaise with the relevant County teams.

Boosting Support for Foster Carers

I'm pleased to report that at its November meeting the Cabinet formally approved a £2 million investment to strengthen our fostering service across Devon. From April next year foster carers will benefit from improved fees and allowances.

This matters for us locally because our rural communities often face particular challenges when it comes to finding foster placements. Distance, transport limitations, and limited local services can all act as real barriers. A better-resourced fostering service should help ensure that children stay closer to home where possible, and that carers in more remote parishes receive appropriate support.

Adult Social Care – New “Transformation Partner” to Help Shape the Future

The council has now formally committed to bringing in a transformation partner to support a significant redesign of our adult social care services across Devon.

The partner - Newton Consulting Ltd - will work alongside the council's Integrated Adult Social Care (IASC) directorate to tackle longstanding pressures: rising demand, workforce and recruitment challenges, financial constraints, and the need to deliver a modern, sustainable, person-centred care model across a large and geographically diverse county.

Key aims of the transformation include:

- Reshaping commissioning and service delivery to improve efficiency while preserving quality and fairness.
- Embedding more consistent, strengths-based and outcome-focused practices across all care services, and improving quality assurance for both providers and in-house provision.

- Reducing reliance on small, single-location providers where possible - expanding capacity and resilience, especially across rural and remote areas of Devon.
- Seeking to realise substantial savings over the next few years (without compromising service quality), by redesigning systems, streamlining processes and better co-ordinating with health, community and voluntary sectors.

For our division this has the potential to be very significant. In a county where demand for care often intersects with transport barriers, social isolation, sparse services and workforce recruitment difficulties, a robust and productive transformation is essential.

I will be monitoring very carefully as the transformation rolls out, especially to hold the partner and IASC to account on fairness, rural provision, workforce support, quality assurance, and transparency. I raised concerns about bringing third-party consultants on board and was assured that they will only take their fee from any savings they can deliver. I'm told that if they are unable to find any savings over the 2 year contract, they will walk away with no fee.

I will raise questions regularly in the forthcoming scrutiny sessions to ensure this process benefits all parts of Devon, not just the better-served urban centres.

Free School Meals – Auto-Enrolment to Reach More Children

I'm also pleased to report that Devon County Council has become the first two-tier authority in the country to implement a new "auto-enrolment / opt-out" scheme for eligible free school meals (FSM).

Under the new approach, children from families whose income or benefit circumstances qualify them for FSM are automatically registered — unless the family chooses to opt out. This removes the previous hurdle of requiring families to apply, a barrier that meant some eligible children missed out.

Early figures suggest the change has already had a real impact. The number of children receiving FSM has grown from around 20,000 to about 21,064 - an increase of roughly 1,060 pupils.

As you know, levels of disadvantage tend to be higher and access to services poorer out here than in urban areas. The auto-enrolment system will help ensure that all children who qualify for FSM - including those whose parents or carers might struggle with paperwork or lack awareness of the scheme - are not left behind.

Ongoing Scrutiny Work

Scrutiny committees have remained active throughout the month:

Health and Adult Care.

We continue to monitor the implications of the proposed Devon and Cornwall ICB merger, especially the £200m savings requirement that poses significant risk to community services, waiting lists and carer support. Officers have been instructed to provide more detailed impact assessments, particularly for rural populations where travelling to care is already a barrier.

Children's Services and SEND.

We are scrutinising the consistency of safeguarding practice, school attendance strategies, and SEND workforce pressures. The recent focus on improving alternative provision is encouraging, but we must ensure reforms translate into better support for families rather than additional bureaucracy.

Highways

As temperatures drop, we are now entering the most difficult period for road conditions. Freeze-thaw cycles quickly turn small surface cracks into full potholes, and although the autumn pilot programmes are showing improvements, winter will inevitably slow progress. Drainage and surface water issues have been widely reported across the division. Thank you to those who have passed on photos, grid references and Highways reference numbers. These allow me to escalate cases more effectively. Please continue to report issues promptly. Early intervention makes a considerable difference in winter months.

Locality Budget

My Locality Budget is now completely spent! I am thrilled that I have been able to approve £8000 worth of fantastic projects across the division. If your council or community group is considering an initiative for early 2026, please feel free to discuss ideas with me before submitting an application for the 2026/27 fund which will open in April next year. The strongest bids tend to be those that demonstrate community involvement, clear local benefit and long-term sustainability.

Looking Ahead

In the coming weeks I will be:

- Following the LGR process now that it has been sent to Whitehall.
- Continuing scrutiny of ICB merger, transformation partner, SWASFT Fire Co-Responder support, and service levels.
- Visiting schools and youth groups following Youth Voice Day.

- Working with communities on drainage, emergency planning, and winter road safety.
- Full Council meeting on Thursday 4th December – a very full agenda awaits!

As ever, your local insight guides much of my work. Please do continue sharing concerns, data and observations from within your communities. They shape the questions I ask, the priorities I raise, and the improvements we can secure together.

With best wishes,

Cllr Ed Tyldesley

County Councillor for Chulmleigh & Landkey Division