

County Councillor Report – Jan/Feb 2026

Dear Parish Councillors,

January and February have been shaped by two dominant themes. Severe winter storms have caused widespread disruption and damage across Devon's roads and railways, and at County Hall we are in the thick of the annual budget setting process under some of the most difficult financial conditions local government has ever faced.

This winter has been exceptional. Extended periods of heavy rainfall followed by freezing temperatures have had a devastating impact on the highway network. I know how frustrating it has been for residents to see roads deteriorate so quickly, with potholes sometimes appearing overnight. I would ask for continued patience while repairs are carried out, and I want to extend my thanks to Devon County Council highways staff and contractors who have been working long hours in extremely challenging conditions to keep roads open and communities connected.

Locality Budget and Community Funding

My County Councillor Locality Budget for the current financial year is now fully allocated. Cabinet is expected to approve the continuation of locality budgets for the coming year, with the new allocation opening in April. I will share full details with parishes as soon as the process formally opens. There is a small chance of that fund increasing slightly, watch this space!

Although I was unable to attend in person, I heard excellent feedback about the Landkey Wassail this year and I'm proud that DCC were able to contribute towards the hire of the marquee. Events like this are about much more than a single evening. They bring people together, strengthen intergenerational links, and keep local traditions alive. In a time when many people feel disconnected, these moments of shared celebration are incredibly important for community resilience and wellbeing. In the face of rising nationalism, this kind of quiet patriotism is exactly what we all need.

I am also delighted that Devon Youth Council has allocated several thousand pounds to activities within our division, including support for Chulmleigh Guides. Youth-led funding decisions like this are a reminder that young people are not simply recipients of services, but active contributors to community life. Supporting youth organisations now helps build confident, engaged citizens for the future.

Community Speed Watch and Local Policing

Community Speed Watch continues to prove its value. I joined the Landkey group for a recent session and we recorded zero speeders! This is the best possible outcome and

shows how effective visible, community-led enforcement can be in changing driver behaviour.

Chulmleigh is now in the process of establishing its own Community Speed Watch group and is actively looking for volunteers. I would strongly encourage anyone with an interest in road safety to consider getting involved. These schemes not only collect useful data, but also help build a culture of shared responsibility on our roads.

I would also like to congratulate Chittlehampton Parish Council on purchasing a set of mobile Vehicle Activated Signs. The parish is now carefully assessing suitable locations so the signs can be rotated and remain effective over time, rather than becoming part of the background.

I am pleased to see increased police presence from Barnstaple Police on Blakes Hill Road in Swimbridge and Landkey. Visible enforcement of speed limits reassures residents and sends a clear message that our rural roads are not risk-free shortcuts.

Highways, Potholes and Winter Damage

This winter has created the perfect storm (if you'll excuse the pun!) for road surface failure. Prolonged saturation of road foundations followed by repeated freeze thaw cycles causes the road surface to fracture and break apart extremely quickly. Running water on the road surface destroys the tarmac in a matter of hours.

Devon County Council has a legal duty to repair certain potholes that meet nationally set criteria. These are known as safety defects and are defined as being at least 40mm deep, 300mm wide, with a vertical edge. Once reported, these must be repaired within 14 days.

At this time of year, meeting that legal duty is incredibly challenging. Tarmac repairs require dry conditions to bond properly. If there is any moisture in the hole at the point of repair, the patch is likely to fail at the next frost. When that happens, the 14-day clock resets and the defect must be repaired again. After two named storms, highway teams are working flat out simply to remain within legal requirements. There is no capacity for preventative resurfacing or waiting for a dry day to make a long-lasting repair.

This has been one of the worst years on record for storm-related road damage, and I fully appreciate the frustration this causes for parish councils and residents alike. We are almost lucky in North Devon compared to some of the damage in other parts of the county, however its hard to remember that when driving through Chapelton on the A377!

I do want to highlight the work of our new Neighbourhood Highways Officer, who is making good progress in tackling the significant backlog of reports that accumulated

during the gap between officers over the past 12 months. That local knowledge and continuity are already making a difference.

As we move towards spring, the focus shifts from emergency response to recovery. This includes repairing damaged road surfaces, clearing blocked drains/culverts/gulleys, refilling salt bins, dealing with fallen or dangerous trees, and addressing surface water and flood damage. Parish councils have a crucial role to play here. Please continue to report every issue through the official system and share reference numbers with me where problems persist. Accurate reporting is still the most effective way to prioritise limited resources.

Health and Adult Care Scrutiny and the County Budget

January and February are always intense months for scrutiny, and this year has been particularly demanding.

The council is currently setting its annual budget following a delayed funding settlement from central government, this probably won't arrive until the 9th February – later than ever recorded. Devon is receiving less money in real terms than ever before, and government funding assumptions rely heavily on councils increasing council tax to plug the gap.

In January, all three scrutiny committees met separately and then together to examine the budget in detail. This resulted in four ten-hour meetings focused on understanding the pressures facing each service area and the consequences of proposed savings. These were enjoyable but exhausting meetings for me, fellow councillors, and our hardworking officers.

Adult social care alone accounts for around £800 million, or 47% of the council's total budget. Despite receiving an increase, the service must still find £21 million in savings this coming year. These decisions are never abstract. They affect real people, many of whom rely on support to live independently and with dignity. The council have engaged a "transformation partner" who is making positive noises about being able to make these savings.

We are still awaiting the Care Quality Commission report into Devon's adult social care services that was carried out before Christmas. All current indicators are positive, and I hope the report will reflect the dedication and professionalism of staff who continue to deliver care under immense pressure.

One clear success from scrutiny work has been our challenge to the South West Ambulance Service. Following sustained pressure, the service has backed down from its plans to remove Fire Co-Responders. Crucially, we were successful in securing the removal of the time limit on standing down FCRs and replacing them with Community

First Responders. This is a significant win for rural communities and demonstrates the value of robust, evidence-based scrutiny.

At the same time, Devon Integrated Care Board has been instructed to find £200 million in savings, around 8% of its budget, in the coming year. This level of reduction is unrealistic and unsustainable. If implemented, it will result in major cuts to NHS services and is a direct consequence of long-term central government underfunding. I am worried about costs being shunted from the NHS into DCC adult social care.

Local Government Reorganisation and Fair Funding

We are still waiting for government decisions on Local Government Reorganisation and what any future unitary authority structure will look like.

The dominant theme of January and February has been uncertainty. Delayed funding settlements, shifting assumptions, and the continued unfairness of the “Fair Funding Formula” all make long-term planning extremely difficult. The current funding system disadvantages large, rural counties like Devon, where the cost of delivering services is higher and distances are greater.

Despite this, the council continues to act responsibly, balancing the budget while doing everything possible to protect frontline services. Financial responsibility matters, but it must be matched by a funding system that recognises the real cost of rural service delivery. There is a good chance that we will be able to lay down reserves for the first time in many years.

Looking Ahead and Parish Collaboration

I am also keen to establish a Division Parish Assembly. My vision is a semi-regular, informal forum bringing together all 14 parishes in the division. These would be roughly two-hour meetings designed to share experience, ideas and practical solutions.

Each parish would be invited to give a short presentation on something they are doing well, followed by discussion and questions. Topics might include employing a lengthsman to clear drains, sourcing and maintaining street furniture, repurposing old phone boxes, running parish youth councils, improving public participation, or developing effective inspection systems.

This would not be about issuing instructions or creating another layer of bureaucracy. It would be a space for learning from each other, pooling knowledge, and strengthening the collective voice of our parishes. I believe this has the potential to be genuinely useful and I am very excited to develop it with you. Please let me know if you'd be interested in taking part.

Thank you, as always, for the work you do and for the support you give. Parish councils sit at the heart of local democracy, and I am grateful for the commitment, expertise and care you bring to your communities.

With best wishes,
Cllr Ed Tyldesley