

County Councillor Report – Mar/Apr 2026

Dear Parish Councillors,

March has been a month of getting out into our communities, continuing detailed scrutiny work at County Hall, and beginning to see the first signs of improvement on our roads as we move out of winter conditions.

One of the highlights for me this month has been launching my new style of residents' surgeries. I held my first "Walk and Talk", where we walked public footpaths together, identified issues on the ground, and reported defects directly to the Council. What made this particularly valuable was the practical element of logging issues on the DCC website and showing residents how to get things fixed. Additionally, wonderfully useful and informative conversations happened alongside our walk. It created space for residents to raise wider concerns about their area in a more informal and constructive setting. I am keen to roll this out across more parishes over the coming months, as it feels like a very practical way of connecting casework with lived experience.

This forms part of the Parish Paths Partnership (P3), a Devon County Council scheme that Chulmleigh Parish Council is a part of, along with the parish of Satterleigh & Warkleigh. I met with the Public Rights of Way team earlier this month to discuss the P3 scheme and they tell me that roughly 15% of the whole PROW budget is delivered by parish councils accessing grants via the P3 scheme. Only a quarter of Devon's parish councils are part of the scheme, so there is an incredible opportunity for large amounts of funding to be accessed by local communities. Happy to talk about the scheme at our meetings.

I also had the pleasure of attending the Chittlehampton Village Hall Lunch Club. What an amazing idea! Bringing people together regularly, creating a sense of community, tackling loneliness, and, I can confirm, serving excellent sticky toffee pudding. These kinds of initiatives do more to support wellbeing than formal services ever could, and they are a reminder of the strength that exists within our communities.

At County Hall, much of the focus this month has been on health and adult social care through our Scrutiny Committee. We questioned the Chair of the Integrated Care Board covering Devon and Cornwall as to why there is almost zero representation of Devon on the board, at a time when the NHS is undergoing significant structural change. As part of national reforms, Integrated Care Boards are being asked to reduce costs and, in our case, combine into larger systems. Devon is now part of a clustering arrangement with Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, with the full merger in the next few years. The Devon ICB has to make £290 million cuts (roughly 8% of their annual budget) here in Devon this year, yet the only Devonian representative on the board is the Director of Public Health of Torbay Council. I feel that this is a significant democratic deficit.

There are some potential benefits to this merger, particularly around efficiency and shared working, but there are also clear risks. Devon is a large and complex county in its own right, and there is a legitimate concern that decision making could become more remote from the communities it serves. For that reason, the Committee has been clear in pressing for stronger and more meaningful representation for Devon within these new arrangements. Scrutiny exists to ensure that changes like this are properly examined, that local knowledge is not lost, and that decisions remain transparent and accountable.

Alongside this, we discussed some of the wider pressures across the care system. One area that is becoming increasingly important is the relationship between housing and care. Good housing is fundamental to helping people live independently, reducing hospital admissions, and ensuring that care services can operate effectively. There is growing recognition that getting housing right is one of the most effective ways of reducing pressure on the wider system, and this is something the Council is working on closely with District Council partners.

We also received updates on safeguarding work, including progress in reducing backlogs in assessments where people's liberty may be restricted as part of their care arrangements. There has been measurable improvement over the past year following additional investment, with waiting times coming down and more people being assessed more quickly. However, demand continues to rise, and it is clear that there is still more to do to ensure people receive timely and appropriate support.

On highways, there are some early signs of improvement. As the weather improves, repairs are holding for longer, and we are beginning to move away from reactive, emergency pothole filling towards more durable and planned maintenance. This is an important shift. Emergency repairs will always be necessary after severe weather, but they are not a long-term solution. The additional £15 million investment in Devon's roads comes into effect from April, and this will allow for more resurfacing, drainage work, and preventative maintenance. While this will not fix every issue overnight, it does mark a move towards a more sustainable approach, and I expect residents will begin to see more noticeable improvements as we move into the summer.

At a national level, there has been a significant amount of activity that will have an impact locally over time. Progress on areas such as tackling misogyny, reforms to workers' rights and renters' rights, animal welfare, and wider school reforms all signal a shift in policy direction that is likely to affect communities like ours. As ever, the challenge will be ensuring that these changes translate into real, practical improvements on the ground.

One specific development that may be of interest locally is the Government's consultation on proposals to prohibit trail hunting in England and Wales. This is an issue

that generates strong views, particularly in rural areas, and the consultation will play an important role in shaping how any future changes are implemented. I would encourage anyone with an interest in this issue to engage with the consultation so that rural perspectives are properly reflected. You can respond to the consultation here:

[Consultation on Proposals to Prohibit Trail Hunting in England and Wales - Defra - Citizen Space](#)

The Council is also currently working through more than 25,000 responses to the libraries consultation. The level of engagement has been significant and underlines just how important these services are. They are community hubs, warm spaces, digital access points, and places where people come together. As proposals develop over the coming months, I will make sure to keep you updated.

There have been significant developments this month on Local Government Reorganisation, with the Government setting out its direction more clearly in a written ministerial statement on 25th March.

In that statement, the Secretary of State confirmed that the Government intends to press ahead with what it describes as “the biggest reform of local government in a generation”, replacing two-tier systems like Devon’s with large unitary authorities. Ministers argue that this will simplify structures and improve service delivery. However, I remain deeply unconvinced that this approach will deliver better outcomes for residents.

Alongside the statement, the Government has already begun implementing these reforms in other parts of the country, with plans to abolish dozens of councils and replace them with a smaller number of large authorities. This includes a reduction in the number of elected councillors and a significant consolidation of decision making.

The response from the County Councils Network is particularly telling. While they support reform in principle, their Chief Executive has warned that the Government’s decisions risk increasing costs for taxpayers and causing disruption to critical services, particularly in adult and children’s care. At a time when council finances are already under severe pressure, that should give us serious pause for thought.

As you may know, my opinion is that the core issue is not just cost, but accountability. These proposals would move decision making further away from the communities it affects, reducing the ability of residents and parish councils to influence outcomes. In a county like Devon, where geography, transport, and local relationships all shape how services are delivered, that loss of local voice is not a small matter.

There is also a wider contradiction at play. We are told that this is part of a broader programme of devolution, yet in practice it feels like power is being pulled upwards into

larger and more remote structures. True devolution should bring decision making closer to communities, not further away from them.

Taken together, these developments reinforce a concern I have held for some time: that this process is being driven by national assumptions about efficiency, rather than a genuine understanding of rural counties like Devon. Bigger does not automatically mean better, and there is a real risk that we lose local knowledge, local accountability, and ultimately the quality of service residents rely on.

As this process continues, I will be making the case clearly that any changes must protect local decision making, deliver genuine value for money, and reflect the realities of rural communities. Parish councils will have a crucial role to play in that conversation, and I will ensure you are kept informed as proposals develop.

Finally, I recently attended the “Places to Go, Things to Do” celebration event, which brought together over 100 organisations that have received a share of £170,000 in youth funding distributed by the Youth Council over the past year. It was genuinely amazing to see the range of projects supported, and particularly positive that a number of them are based within our division. This kind of local, grassroots investment is one of the most effective ways of creating opportunities for young people and strengthening community life.

Looking ahead, my focus will be on supporting the rollout of highways improvements as the new funding comes online, expanding the Walk & Talk sessions to more parishes, and continuing to ensure that the voices of our communities are clearly heard in both local and national decision making processes. I’m very much looking forward to the Councillor Locality Budget reopening, this year we will have £10,000 to allocate to local projects.

Thank you, as always, for the work you do in your parishes. The role you play is essential, and it is a privilege to work alongside you.

All the best

Cllr Ed Tyldesley