

Councillor James Buczkowski

August and September 2026 Update

This report provides an update on my work as Devon County Councillor during August and September, together with information about some of the principal issues being considered by Devon County Council.

Local government reorganisation

In July, the Government announced that it had selected a proposal to replace the existing county and district councils in Devon with four unitary authorities: an expanded Exeter, an expanded Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon, and a new Devon Coast and Countryside authority. The proposal would have divided the present Cullompton, Bradninch and Kentisbeare county division, with Cullompton west of the M5 placed in a two-member ward and Cullompton east of the M5, Bradninch and Kentisbeare placed in a separate single-member ward. I raised concerns about these interim arrangements, particularly the proposed use of large multi-member wards, which I believe would weaken clear local representation and accountability.

In September, the Government announced that implementation would be paused while it reviewed whether the process had been robust, lawful and consistent with its wider priorities. The Government has indicated that local elections in May 2027 will now take place on existing council boundaries. In Devon, these will be district council elections.

Devon County Council has sought urgent clarification about the scope and timetable of the review and is preserving its legal position while awaiting a fuller response. The previous timetable and structure can no longer be treated as settled.

Before the pause, DCC had been required to begin preparing for implementation and had considered establishing a £30 million reserve to protect essential services during the transition. Following the Government's announcement, that reserve was not established. The council is asking the Government to reimburse the reasonable costs already incurred as a result of its instructions. My position is that Devon's council-tax payers should not have to meet costs resulting from a national programme that was initiated and then paused by Government.

There remains considerable scope for councils in Devon to work together more effectively, share systems and services, reduce duplication and provide better value. That work does not necessarily require the abolition of existing councils or the expenditure of tens of millions of pounds on creating new organisations. Whatever follows the review, protecting essential services, local identity and democratic accountability must remain central.

Devon County Council's financial position

Cabinet considered the Month 4 budget monitoring report on 9 September. At the end of July, the council was forecasting a General Fund overspend of £8.8 million for 2026/27. The principal pressure was in integrated adult social care, which was forecasting an overspend of approximately £10 million as a result of increased demand, inflation and planned savings that are not currently expected to be achieved.

The budget included £38.3 million of savings for the year. At Month 4, services expected to deliver £30.9 million, leaving a forecast shortfall of approximately £7.5 million. Work is continuing to identify alternative savings and management action. Month 4 is still relatively early in the financial year, but the scale of the gap means that firm financial control will be required throughout the remainder of the year.

The report also identified local government reorganisation as a significant risk to current and future savings programmes. At least £1 million of savings non-delivery was then estimated to be directly attributable to staff and resources being diverted to reorganisation work. Although the Government has since paused implementation, the costs already incurred and the disruption to agreed programmes have not disappeared.

The Dedicated Schools Grant remains separate from the General Fund position and continues to present a substantial financial risk because of the accumulated deficit associated with high-needs provision. I will continue to press for realistic recovery plans, clear reporting and early corrective action, while ensuring that decisions do not simply defer costs or weaken essential services.

Children's services

Ofsted has recognised continued improvement in Devon's children's services following a monitoring visit in August. Inspectors identified stronger decision-making, effective early-help services and increasingly coordinated support for children and families.

The inspection found that concerns were generally reviewed promptly, responses for children at risk of significant harm were timely and transitions between teams were being managed more effectively. Devon's targeted early-help service and its out-of-hours emergency duty service were highlighted positively.

This is encouraging recognition of the work undertaken by staff and partner organisations, but the improvement programme is not complete. Further work remains necessary across children's services, including increasing local provision, recruiting foster carers and ensuring that every child and family receives a consistently good service.

Adult social care

The Care Quality Commission has rated DCC's adult social care responsibilities as "Requires Improvement." The assessment identified strengths in person-centred practice, partnership working, leadership and the council's approach to continuous learning. However, it also identified areas where improvement is necessary, including the timeliness of assessments, reviews and financial assessments, safeguarding waiting lists, Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards backlogs and support for unpaid carers.

An improvement plan has been prepared and is expected to be considered by Cabinet in October. It will be important that progress is measured through clear evidence and improved experiences for people using services, rather than simply changes to internal processes.

DCC is also changing how it supports unpaid carers. Statutory carers' assessments and reviews are being brought in-house, while a Carer Wellbeing Alliance led by voluntary and community organisations is being developed to provide more flexible community-based support.

Existing funding of approximately £2.6 million is expected to be maintained, with a greater proportion directed toward frontline support. The changes will need to be implemented carefully, with genuine involvement from carers and continuity for people currently receiving assistance.

Cullompton Town Centre Relief Road

Construction of the Cullompton Town Centre Relief Road has moved into its principal delivery phase. Wills Bros is the main contractor for the approximately 1.3-kilometre route, with completion currently expected in March 2028.

The next phase requires temporary four-way traffic signals at the Station Road and Millennium Way junction between 7pm and 6am. The arrangements began on 14 September and are expected to continue until spring 2027, principally from Monday to Friday, although occasional Saturday night working may be required.

The night-time arrangements allow site clearance, drainage work and utility diversions to be completed safely before construction begins on the new Station Road roundabout. The junction will remain open, with access maintained for residents, businesses and emergency services, but motorists may experience delays and should allow additional time where possible.

These works are another important step in delivering a long-awaited scheme. Temporary traffic management will inevitably cause some inconvenience, and I have stressed the importance of giving residents, businesses and road users clear advance notice of changes. Further information and construction updates are available at <https://letstalk.middevon.gov.uk/cullompton-relief-road>.

The Relief Road is essential to reducing traffic through Cullompton and supporting the wider transport improvements required for the area. Nevertheless, a project of this scale will inevitably cause some disruption during construction. I continue to raise concerns from residents and businesses with the project team and seek clear advance communication about traffic management and changes affecting local routes.

Cullompton railway station and M5 Junction 28

Work on the proposed Cullompton railway station continues, with detailed design and procurement activity under way. Network Rail remains confident about the project, although outstanding matters include flood modelling, drainage and property agreements.

I remain cautiously optimistic, but I do not believe it is responsible to describe the station as a completed deal until these matters have been resolved and the necessary contracts have been awarded. It is also important that it is developed as a station for Cullompton and the surrounding communities, rather than as a car-dependent parkway. Proper connections to bus services, walking and cycling routes on both sides of the M5 will be essential.

The Department for Transport has approved the Strategic Outline Case for improvements to M5 Junction 28. Work is now progressing toward an Outline Business Case, currently targeted for spring 2027. The station, Junction 28, Relief Road and local walking, cycling and public transport connections must be planned as an integrated network rather than as separate projects.

Highways across the division

I continue to raise the condition of the B3181 between Cullompton and Broadclyst and have called for a properly planned programme of work rather than reliance on repeated temporary repairs. This is an important route for local communities and also serves as a strategic diversion route when problems occur on the M5. I have been raising its condition consistently for approximately 18 months and raised it directly with the Cabinet Member for Highways around 12 months ago.

As Cabinet Member for Finance and Public Value, I supported the 2026/27 budget approach of increasing investment in both preventative highway maintenance and responsive and emergency repairs. The council's medium-term plans include an additional £55 million of capital investment in preventative maintenance. Planned resurfacing and larger patching schemes are important because treating a deteriorating road properly can extend its life and provide better value than repeatedly returning to repair individual defects. Devon's network is vast and the available funding will not address every problem, but this is the direction in which I believe our maintenance programme needs to continue.

There is still a great deal to do. A number of problem areas remain across the division, often on quieter country lanes which may carry less traffic but are no less important to the residents, farms and businesses that depend upon them. I will continue to press for these roads to be inspected and repaired and for limited resources to be directed according to condition, safety and local impact.

Please continue to report potholes and other highway problems directly to Devon County Council. The network is inspected, but reports from residents provide essential information and help officers to identify defects between scheduled inspections. Problems can be reported at <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/report-a-problem/>.

Baulk Bridge

The replacement of Baulk Bridge on the B3181 remains a significant and lengthy project. The current programme runs from May 2026 until November 2027.

The work is necessary, but the extended construction period and associated traffic arrangements affect residents and businesses across the division. I will continue to monitor progress and press for clear communication about any changes to access, closures or the anticipated timetable.

I undertook a site visit on 24 September, meeting the contractor and seeing the work at first hand. I was advised that the project remains on programme and within its approved budget. I will continue to monitor progress closely, particularly the management of traffic and the effect of the works on nearby communities and businesses.

Water and wastewater infrastructure

The restrictions introduced by South West Water during the summer raised important questions about the capacity and resilience of the network serving Mid Devon. The issue was not simply the amount of raw water available; it also concerned treatment and distribution capacity in the Allers supply area.

South West Water has confirmed that significant growth around Cullompton will require a new resilience trunk main of approximately 16 kilometres, currently planned for construction from 2028. Additional treatment capacity will also be required at Cullompton Sewage Treatment Works, with construction currently expected to begin in 2027.

I submitted a motion to Mid Devon District Council calling for water-supply and wastewater capacity to be considered properly through Plan Mid Devon and its supporting infrastructure evidence. The motion seeks earlier engagement with South West Water and the Environment Agency, named contacts within the relevant organisations, transparent recording of infrastructure risks and closer alignment between planned development and investment programmes.

It also proposes inviting both organisations to an appropriate council or committee meeting. South West Water would be asked to explain the capacity and resilience of the local water and wastewater systems and its planned investment. The Environment Agency would be asked to address environmental and regulatory implications, including water quality, receiving watercourses and environmental permit requirements.

These questions must be answered before major development is allowed to outpace the infrastructure needed to support it.

The motion was considered by MDDC's Full Council on 23 September and I am pleased that it was approved. This gives the council a clear mandate to bring the water company and environmental regulator into the discussion, improve the evidence available to members and the public, and ensure that water and wastewater capacity is treated as a central part of planning for growth rather than an issue to be addressed after development has been permitted.

The decision does not itself build the infrastructure or predetermine the policies in the new Local Plan. It does, however, require the right questions to be asked early, the risks to be recorded openly and provider investment programmes to be tested against the scale and timing of development proposed. I will continue to follow the implementation of the motion and press for the requested engagement to take place promptly.

Preparing for more extreme weather

Councils, farmers, water companies, scientists and environmental organisations met in September to consider how Devon can prepare for increasingly extreme changes between wet and dry conditions.

This work is particularly relevant following a wet start to 2026, a very dry summer and the subsequent water restrictions. It reinforces the need to consider water supply, drainage, flood risk, river quality, agricultural resilience and development planning together.

Conferences and strategies have value only if they lead to practical changes. Locally, the immediate test will be whether infrastructure providers and planning authorities coordinate investment with the scale and timing of proposed development.

East Cullompton consultation

Mid Devon District Council is consulting on a Design Code and Phasing and Delivery Strategy for the East Cullompton allocation, intended to form the first phase of the Culm Garden Village proposals.

Although this is a district council planning matter, the proposals have major implications for county services and the surrounding communities. These include highways, schools, walking and cycling routes, public transport, water and wastewater infrastructure and the timing of community facilities.

My focus will be on whether infrastructure is secured and delivered at the right time; whether limits on development before improvements to Junction 28 are clear and enforceable; and whether education, health, transport and utility requirements are based on credible evidence rather than future aspirations.

The proposals must also remain properly connected to Cullompton. I do not support the creation of a separate identity or governance arrangement that weakens the relationship with the existing town.

Cullompton Town Council should have a central role in future stewardship and community governance.

I encourage parish councils and residents to examine the consultation documents carefully and respond before the deadline.

Rural affairs: drought and bluetongue

DCC's Farms Estate Committee has considered the effects of the prolonged dry weather and bluetongue virus on tenant farmers. Poor grass growth and reduced crop yields have added to pressure on farms, while bluetongue has resulted in livestock losses and concerns about fertility and the longer-term health of affected herds and flocks.

DCC has called for faster testing, clearer communication, adequate vaccine availability, appropriate financial support and a coherent long-term national strategy. Information about Government advice and emergency assistance is also being provided to affected tenants.

These are not issues confined to the council's own farms. Agriculture remains central to Devon's rural economy, landscape and food production, and the consequences of animal disease and increasingly volatile weather extend throughout rural communities.

Support for residents

Crisis and Resilience Fund

Residents facing sudden financial hardship may be able to obtain support through the Crisis and Resilience Fund, which replaced the Household Support Fund. It can help with essential costs such as food, energy, water, housing costs and heating oil.

The scheme is administered locally through district councils and Citizens Advice Devon. Applicants do not necessarily need to be receiving benefits, as eligibility depends upon individual circumstances and the nature of the financial difficulty.

Free school meals

From September, children living in households receiving Universal Credit may qualify for free school meals under expanded Government rules. Families are encouraged to apply formally, even if they were not eligible under the previous income threshold.

It remains important to distinguish between general entitlement to a free meal and the lower-income eligibility that also attracts pupil premium and certain other forms of support for the school and family.

Business and employment support

Free advice, mentoring and training are available to businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs across Mid Devon. Support includes starting a business, growth planning, finance, digital productivity, marketing, leadership and sustainability.

The Connect to Work programme also supports people with disabilities, health conditions or other barriers to employment to find and remain in paid work.

Blood-pressure monitors

Blood-pressure monitoring kits can be borrowed free of charge from Devon's libraries for up to three weeks. The kits include a monitor, instructions, a diary for recording results and advice about what to do if readings are high.

Winter Fuel Payment scams

Residents should be cautious about unexpected messages concerning Winter Fuel Payments. Most payments are made automatically, and the Department for Work and Pensions will not request bank details by text message.

Unexpected links should not be opened and personal or financial information should not be supplied.

Suspicious text messages can be forwarded free of charge to 7726.

Pollution reporting

Following recent reports of pollution incidents, I have asked DCC and the Environment Agency to support clearer public information about how residents can report suspected pollution and what evidence is most useful.

Rapid reporting, an accurate location and photographs or video—where these can be obtained safely—can assist an investigation. I will share the confirmed reporting arrangements with parish councils once I have received a response.

Councillor surgeries and contact

I continue to hold regular surgeries across the division:

- Kentisbeare: first Saturday of each month;
- Bradninch Guildhall: second Saturday of each month;
- Cullompton: fourth Saturday of each month.

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