

We have ended the last financial year in balance – but tough choices lie ahead

We have ended the 2024/25 financial year without going over budget, but only by relying on temporary savings and one-off government funding.

A report presented to cabinet today showed that we managed to stay within its £637.5 million budget and ‘balance the books’ despite growing demand for services like social care and support for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

We had been expecting to overspend by nearly £4 million in November but managed to avoid this through a mix of short-term measures, including delaying some projects, not filling vacant jobs, and using a one-off grant from government.

The report also showed that £40 million in planned savings were delivered across council services, though this fell short of the £50 million target.

Councillor James Buczkowski, Cabinet Member for Finance, said:

“This isn’t a moment to celebrate, but it is a moment to be honest. Officers have worked incredibly hard to help balance the books, and that deserves recognition.

“But let’s be clear: this balanced position was only achieved by using temporary fixes. “It’s not a sign that everything is fine. We’ve inherited a fragile financial position, depleted cash balances and a special educational needs deficit now over £169 million.

“The public deserves honesty. We are facing some of the most difficult financial conditions in decades, and we cannot keep doing things the old way. Our new administration is committed to rebuilding trust and making services more sustainable, by working differently, being open about the challenges, and focusing on what really matters to people.”

He added that the Council must now plan ahead carefully and work closely with partners to find better, more sustainable ways to support Devon’s communities.

Council to trial pothole repair blitz as part of £83 million road maintenance programme

Our highways teams will carry out a repair blitz on potholes in a few trial areas of the county following a decision by Councillors today (Wednesday 25 June).

While approving an £83 million programme of capital funded highway maintenance schemes, our Cabinet heard from Councillor Dan Thomas, Cabinet Member for Highways, who stated that the condition of Devon's roads is not up to scratch because the county is "grossly under resourced by central government".

Councillors backed proposals to trial areas where all potholes would be filled, rather than just dealing with safety defects. Although the exact details are still to be agreed, this pilot would be used to establish the budget implications of changing maintenance procedures.

Councillors also agreed that a task group from the Audit Committee should be formed to review the previous Cabinet's decision from last November on the future delivery model for highway maintenance.

The Cabinet at the time resolved that a procurement process should get underway for a Term Maintenance Contract to deliver core highway work such as safety defect repairs, gully emptying and winter service, supported with smaller "Framework Contracts" for additional patching, surfacing, drainage and other improvements.

It was also agreed to examine the costs of accelerating the remarking of white lines across the county.

Councillor Dan Thomas, Cabinet Member for Highways, said:

"We're being very honest that the state of the roads is not as we would want; that's our starting point. The one message that I would like the public to hear today is that every single member of the Highways Department, from the director to the neighbourhood highways officers that we deal with on a daily basis, are all acutely aware that we are not able to do the things the public wants us to do as quickly as we would like. It is simply because we are grossly under resourced by central government and I think we have to make that very clear from the start of this Council.

"We have a repair backlog of around £390 million, and to keep us in a steady state it costs around £102 million a year. We don't have that, so whatever we do under the current funding formula, we're not going to solve the problem – we have to be clear about that. We're not alone in this, but that's little consolation to residents in Devon.

"We're asking for a trial in a few areas to fill all potholes, not just safety defects, when visiting a site. By asking to trial this change it's a very different notion from where we were before and we want to establish what the cost implications are and how effective that would be on the lower category roads."

The capital funded highway maintenance programme for 2025/26 sets out our plans to maintain our highways assets and road network, which at 8,000 miles in length, is the largest highway network in the country.

The independent National Highway and Transport (NHT) Network's latest 2024 survey results has shown that by adopting more efficient practices, we saved over £2.6 million in the 2023/24 financial year.

Upgrading streetlights to energy efficient LEDs since 2016 has also led to an annual financial saving of £6 million at today's prices, as well as annual carbon savings of 10,900 tonnes Co2e (carbon equivalent), compared to usage in 2016, which is the equivalent to an 80% saving. A current 12-month trial of overnight dimming across the county offers potential to provide even more savings.

Innovative new materials are being adopted for use. A new road repair material called Elastomac, which is partly made from recycled materials, is being used on our roads following successful trials on small to medium size patches. It reduces waste and carbon emissions while also being quicker to cure than traditional pothole repair materials, which reduces traffic disruption.

Road markings are being carried out using Methyl Methacrylate (MMA) which is applied cold, so it is safer to use than the previous thermoplastic product that has been the historic standard. It is more reflective, so improves road safety, and a three-year trial in Cheshire found a 62% reduction in collisions, while the longer lifespan of the product means fewer return visits are needed to repaint the lines, leading to a 50% reduction in network disruption and at least 10% cost saving over a 10-year period.

Around £56 million of this year's highway maintenance capital budget will be invested in road maintenance and surface treatments, with the remainder being allocated to bridges and structures, streetlighting, traffic signals, public rights of way and other highways assets.

To ensure principal roads across the county are retained in a condition where less than 4% require immediate attention, £8.7 million has been allocated for preventative treatments and resurfacing.

This includes resurfacing on:

A379/A3015 – Rydon Lane (from Pines Hill to Countess Wear) in Exeter
A3015 – Frog Street, Exeter
A381 – Totnes to Littlehempston
A3052 – Hangmanstone to Southleigh junction
A3052 – Half Way Inn to Goosemoor, Aylesbeare
A385 – Coronation Road Roundabout, Totnes
A390 – Callington Road, Tavistock
A390 – Ford Street roundabout, Tavistock
A39 – Alexandra Road, Barnstaple
A361 – Mullacott Cross, West Down
A373 – Hembury Hill to Colliton Cross, Broadhembury
A375 – Two Bridges Road, Sidmouth
A377 – New Bridge, Bishops Tawton
A377 – Bugford Cross, Morchard Bishop
A386 – Bassets Cross, Hatherleigh
A386 – Dartmoor Inn, Lydford
A386 – Fox and Hounds Pub, Bridestowe
A386 – New Road, Bideford
A396 – Exeter Road, Tiverton
A396 – The Walronds, Tiverton

A396 – Exeter Inn roundabout to Riversmeet Cottage, Bampton

A399 – Watermouth Road, Ilfracombe

Extensive patching, drainage improvements and resurfacing schemes on B-roads and C-class roads are set to receive £14.5 million.

A further £3.5 million is being allocated to patching and small resurfacing schemes on highly trafficked main routes that link communities or connect to economic hubs.

Preventative maintenance treatments such as surface dressing, micro asphalt and footway “slurry sealing” are used to preserve and extend the life of highway surfaces that are already in a reasonable condition. This work will receive an investment of £11.2 million.

Our fleet of Dragon Patchers provides another option for patch repairs – with £1.6 million earmarked to support their work, while £12.9 million will be used to deliver a programme of large safety defect patching repairs.

An investment of £9.5 million will support the maintenance of bridges and structures, including the replacement of Martinhoe bridge and repairs to Pinhoe Railway and Crediton Leat Bridges. The reinstatement of Coleridge Footbridge in Ottery St Mary, which was closed due to damage sustained by a fallen tree, is also due to be completed subject to approval by the Environment Agency.

Drainage remains a key focus for us, in order to tackle a key cause of deterioration of local roads. This is due to receive £2.95 million.

To support active travel, public rights of way and cycle networks across the county will be maintained with £1.2 million, with an additional £750,000 for the Renewal of Access Trails infrastructure.

New cabinet vows to improve the outcomes of our most vulnerable children through new 10-year plan

A new long-term plan to improve the outcomes of Devon's most vulnerable young people by overhauling how they are supported and cared for has been approved by our cabinet.

In a bold move away from the council's previous preference to commission, rather than directly deliver, residential places for children in its care, councillors today (Wednesday 25 June) agreed to an ambitious multi-million investment programme to establish 12 new children's homes; 20 specialist foster places; and up to four new therapeutic schools, over the next 10 years.

'Growing Futures: Homes for children and young people in care in Devon' aims to provide new homes, support, residential therapeutic care, education and treatment for children with complex psychological, emotional and behavioural needs.

Our plan will be delivered through a strategic partnership worth up to £156 million and aims to address deficiencies in current care arrangements.

We are required to provide suitable homes for children in care; but nationally an over-reliance on for-profit providers has contributed to rising costs and poor value for money.

In Devon for instance costs have almost doubled in five years amid rising demand.

There has been a 29 per cent increase in Devon children in residential homes since 2020 and many of those are not in the county.

The new strategy will aim to reduce costs and improve long-term outcomes for children through more stable, local, and therapeutic housing and education options.

Councillor Richard Jefferies, our Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care said:

"It's not fair that so many children are living far away from their support networks, their friends and family; they want to be looked after by people who are nurturing and friendly, and they want to be close to activities and their school and they want to be able to make friends.

"The way things are now this is difficult to achieve, and it can result in many having several homes, relationship breakdowns and disruptions.

"Children in care are more likely to have poorer outcomes than their peers with a more settled homelife, they are more at risk of being excluded, and more likely to have a criminal record.

"We have been failing many of our children for too long and his needs to change; this plan aims to improve outcomes for all children in care."