

## **County Councillor Report – June 2026**

Cabinet this month received the final revenue and capital outturn for 2025/26. The Council ended the year in a balanced position, which is a welcome sign of improved financial grip after many years of very difficult budget pressures. The headline of the outturn is that we underspent by £9.8 million last year. Adult social care, children's social care and SEND, remain under enormous pressure. However, ending the year in a stronger position has allowed some important additional investment to be carried forward. In the administration's first year, we have demonstrated financial responsibility and an ability to make serious efficiencies.

£4 million has been invested to support additional highways maintenance, specifically through creating four Fast Action Response Gangs (to the north, south, east and west) who will only ever have 10 days of work in front of them – allowing them to be reactive to issues causing real concern. £1 million has been set aside to invest in the Children's Social Care workforce, and £416,000 will support the diagnostic work needed for Devon's High Needs Stability Grant application as part of SEND reform. A further £2 million has also been transferred into the Service Transformation reserve. They are the sorts of decisions that determine whether we can repair more roads, stabilise vital services, and make practical improvements for residents.

Devon has now approved an additional £15 million for highways maintenance in 2026/27, followed by an extra £10 million per year for the following four years. This is significant and welcome, but it will still need to be spent carefully. A positive development this month was Cabinet's agreement to an expanded 12-month pothole repair trial. The original trial ran in Hatherleigh & Chagford and Barnstaple South, and tested a more proactive approach. Instead of only repairing potholes that met the strict safety criteria, crews were also able to fix some emerging "serviceability" defects while they were already on site. This is exactly the sort of common-sense approach many residents have been asking for.

The future of Devon's libraries was another major item at Cabinet this month. Following a very large public consultation, with over 25,000 responses, Cabinet agreed Option C, meaning no reduction in weekly staffed opening hours. The proposed library area groupings and bandings were also removed.

This is a very welcome decision. Libraries are about far more than books. In rural communities they are safe, welcoming public spaces. They support children and families, older residents, people without reliable internet access, jobseekers, community groups, and people who simply need somewhere warm, friendly and accessible. The consultation responses (25,000!) showed just how strongly people value their libraries, and I am pleased that the Council listened.

Cabinet also agreed to continue work on Open+ technology, develop a new volunteer strategy with Libraries Unlimited, and create a new model of partnership libraries using the £1 million Libraries Transformation and Rural Hub Fund. There will also be an additional £100,000 per year in the book fund for 2026/27 and 2027/28, and overdue book fines will stop being collected from 1 October 2026. I think that last point matters. Fines can become a small but real barrier, particularly for families and those on lower incomes. A library service should encourage people back in, not make them anxious about returning.

At Full Council, we also discussed the report from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services. This is an area of particular importance to me, both as a councillor and a teacher. There has been real and sustained progress in Children's Social Care over the past year. Permanent social worker numbers have increased, reliance on agency staff has reduced, and there has been a much clearer focus on stabilising the workforce and improving practice. That matters because children and families need consistency. A child in care, or a family going through an incredibly difficult period, should not have to keep retelling their story to a changing cast of professionals. Social workers also need manageable caseloads, good supervision and the confidence that the organisation is backing them to do the job properly.

There is still a great deal to do, and nobody should pretend the improvement journey is complete. However, the direction of travel is positive. Investment in the children's social care workforce, the improved fostering fees and allowances, the development of new supported accommodation for older looked-after children, and the work around Families First all point towards a system trying to become more stable and effective.

The Council has also increased its public transport support budget by £2.508 million for 2026/27, recognising the importance of maintaining the existing local bus network, particularly for rural communities. That said, I remain very aware that too many villages still have inadequate bus services, and that timetable reliability, affordability and connections to education, work and health services all need continued attention. Community transport and the voluntary sector also remain vital, particularly for those who cannot access conventional public transport.