Annual Report County Councillor Update

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Torrington Rural Division

This year has been my **first year serving as your County Councillor**, and it has been an incredibly busy and eye opening one. Being elected in May was a real honour, but the pace quickly picked up, particularly as I was also appointed **Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs** straight away. This has meant a steep learning curve and a very full diary, but it has also given me the opportunity to make sure rural communities like ours have a strong voice at County Hall.

Cabinet Role- Rural Affairs

My Cabinet role comes with a very wide remit, covering issues such as rural connectivity, farming, transport, rural crime and hidden rural deprivation. I work closely with council officers, partner organisations, MPs and groups such as the NFU and Devon and Cornwall Police. I regularly speak at Cabinet, Full Council and scrutiny meetings to ensure that rural Devon is properly reflected in decision making and is not overshadowed by more urban areas.

Roads Highways and Infrastructure

Road conditions have been one of the issues most frequently raised with me by residents. Devon is responsible for around **8,000 miles of roads**, making it the largest highways network in the country. After a winter of severe weather, the pressure on this network has been immense.

This year the council agreed an **additional £19M of investment into highways**, with **£4M specifically ringfenced for drainage and gully clearance**. This is crucial in rural areas where standing water leads quickly to potholes. I have spent time out on the ground with Neighbourhood Highways Officers inspecting local problem areas and feeding residents' concerns directly into future work programmes.

Public Transport

Public transport has been another major area of work this year. I was contacted by a large number of residents following sudden increases in bus fares, particularly affecting children and young people travelling to school and college. Some post sixteen students were facing costs of **over four hundred pounds per term** for travel.

After launching a petition supported by more than **two thirds of county councillors**, meeting directly with Stagecoach senior management, working with MPs and local schools, I am pleased that this resulted in the creation of the **North Devon Zone**, which now includes Great Torrington. This change came into effect in January and has delivered significant fare reductions, making travel more affordable for regular users commuting to education, work and appointments.

Children Young People and Families

Supporting children and families has been a major priority. Devon currently looks after around **eight hundred and ten children in care**, and there is a continuing need for more foster carers. This year we have taken steps to improve foster carer support, including better allowances and access to equipment.

I have also been proud to support the **Places to Go Things to Do youth grant**, which has already distributed **£160,000 through over one hundred small grants** to youth projects across

Devon. These grants have supported everything from rural youth outreach sessions to creative and wellbeing activities. Due to its success, the scheme will run again this year with a further **£160,000 committed**.

Health Social Care and Community Safety

Healthcare access remains a real challenge in rural areas. I have consistently raised concerns about NHS dentistry shortages, long ambulance response times and proposals to remove fire co responders from rural communities. These co responders often arrive first in emergencies where ambulance delays are unavoidable, and I have spoken out strongly about the risks of withdrawing this support.

Alongside this, I have supported a new 4 year **domestic abuse strategy 2026-2030**, aimed at increasing access to safe accommodation and specialist support, particularly for people facing additional barriers.

Libraries and Community Hubs

Libraries are something I care deeply about, especially because of their importance as community hubs in rural towns and villages. Devon's library service currently supports **fifty libraries**, with more than 2.3million visits each year, supported by hundreds of volunteers.

The recent library consultation received an unprecedented response, with **over 25,000 residents taking part**, making it the largest consultation of its kind the council has ever run. We are currently carefully considering all feedback, including thousands of written responses.

A detailed report setting out the findings and recommended next steps will be presented to Cabinet in May. The existing library budget of **just over £7M** has been protected, and an **additional £1M** has been set aside to support genuine transformation and community led improvements. Throughout this process I have been clear that libraries are far more than places to borrow books. They provide warm spaces, digital access, learning opportunities and a welcoming environment for all ages.

Local Grants and Community Support

Over the last year I have been pleased to support a range of community projects through councillor locality funding. From April, this funding will increase to **£10,000 per councillor**, helping to support youth groups, community facilities, accessibility improvements and local events. These small grants can make a big difference, and I am always happy to discuss ideas with local groups.

Looking Ahead

This first year has been full on and at times challenging, particularly balancing the responsibilities of a Cabinet role alongside representing a large rural division. However, it has also been incredibly rewarding. I have met so many passionate people, learned a great deal, and been able to help secure real improvements for our area.

Thank you to parish councils, volunteers and residents for your support, feedback and many conversations throughout the year. Please do feel free to get in touch at any time if there is something you would like to raise or discuss. I look forward to continuing to work with you over the year ahead.