

**DCC County Councillor Report;
Paul Hayward – Axminster Division / June 2025**

Dear Chair and members of the Parish Council

17/6/2025

I hope this finds you well.

After a few hectic weeks post-election, taken up mostly with training, induction, meet-&-greet and getting to know all the staff, officers and my fellow “newbies” at County Hall, I have hit the ground running and present my inaugural CC report to you.

As a backbencher and an independent Cllr to boot, I do not have access to a political group/office to write these newsletters for me so please bear with me as I find the right balance between topical information and general facts. A lot of the day-to-day DCC news comes out via their regular online newsletter, which the Clerk can subscribe to and then circulate to all members. I can't see the point of replicating all that information herein and certainly don't think that members in the Axe Valley area wish to know about youth centres in Barnstaple, verges in Crediton and pothole-filling trials in Ashburton! But, if I am mistaken, please let me know and I can start adding such items in.

Sadly, I have not been able to secure time with my predecessor, and so no handover has been possible. I am therefore starting from a 'Ground Zero' perspective, and will be grateful to receive any information from you, or your Clerk, as to pressing issues in your parish and progress with any projects or plans you feel DCC have not delivered on, or that you wish me to escalate on your behalf.

From a personal perspective, I have joined with the Green/Independent group (6 Green Cllrs and 2 indies) to work alongside the new LD administration but NOT within their group. Similarly, I will work collegiately with the Councillors across Devon representing the Conservative and Reform political parties.

I have been appointed (at my request) to sit on the Public Rights of Way Committee (as Vice Chair) and on the Audit Committee (also as VC) and on the Children's Scrutiny Committee (as a member). Rather surprisingly, I was also elected (from a shortlist of two!) to Chair the Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority Audit Committee, overseeing and auditing that newly created local government entity until such time as it is dissolved as part of the ongoing Devolution / LGR project (perhaps 2028/29)

Some key areas of focus for me right now:

VAS installations across the division.

I know how frustrated parishes have been by the delays in the procurement, approval and installation of the speed devices in at least 2 of the parishes within the AXM division.

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The delays have been put down to staff absence and lack of resource but one of my first tasks (alongside 30+ member queries on the new DCC portal) was to seek a definite timeline for delivery of these road safety devices and will continue to 'pester' until they get installed to the satisfaction of the PC's concerned, and without any element of overcharging to the parish councils by DCC (albeit they use a 3rd party highways contractor known as Milestone who have a % profit built into the SLA).

I'll liaise with the Clerks concerned to monitor this through the pipeline.

P3 / Footpaths:

There are some delays presently with the processing of P3 grant claims to parishes for FY25-26 and I'd be grateful to Clerks for confirmation of when the funds DO arrive so that I can check these off for each parish. The reason for asking to be on the P3 (PROW) committee is to keep an eye on this scheme and the administration/delivery of P3 works as I think this will be an easy target for service/grant reductions as we progress towards DEVO. If any parishes (or your Hon Footpath wardens) get the brush off, please let me know and I can escalate.

HATOC.

The Highways and Traffic Orders Committee considers and approves highways schemes across East Devon and all DCC Cllrs for the district sit on the ED one. The training session is set for 21/7 and I intend to use that event as an opportunity to challenge Highways on a number of matters, including signage, road markings, speed limits, VAS delivery, maintenance etc.

Please let me know if there are any projects in your parish that you'd like me to raise at the committee.

Adult Social Care

This service area spends more DCC money than any other and needs radical assessment and review, but that also requires a national conversation on funding and resource, alongside the NHS service model for care and support. The new administration has made it clear that continuing to do things 'the old way' is no longer an option and no stone will be left unturned to try and make best use of DCC's scant resources to provide the best care for our elderly and vulnerable residents.

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Child Social Care

Similarly, this service is operating on a broken model, and needs an urgent overhaul. It was raised at the Audit Committee last week by our internal, and external, auditors and by committee members, including myself. DCC must simply do better, procure better, manage better and deliver more with less, as every household in the UK finds itself having to do. I've challenged some key costings and KPI's in recent meetings.

SEND

I am sad to report that DCC's OFSTED report is not happy reading! The internal auditor and the external auditor have both raised red flags over the delivery and costs of this key service which is failing children across Devon. The current SEND deficit is approaching **£160m** and if central government fails to come up with a funding plan or solution by March next year (mentioned in last week's LG spending review and to be finalised in the "Autumn") most local authorities with SEND responsibilities will fall into insolvency by April 2026. An extraordinary meeting of the Audit Committee has been convened in July 2025 to consider this matter – sticking our heads in the sand and hoping it will go away in no longer an option!

I have received multiple correspondence from distressed families whose children have been failed by DCC education services over the last 8 years and nothing seems to be happening to fix it – until now. The new Leader of the Council has appointed 3 cabinet members specifically to look at Children's services in Devon (one member previously) and I genuinely hope some new thinking can create some solutions to support those children who need our help the most!

Highways

Almost every day, I get a complaint about a pothole. Our roads are literally falling apart!

I would ask all Councillors and Clerks to direct residents to the DCC Report a Problem website (DCCRAP) but also suggest that they forward the report confirmations to me at my DCC email address so I can catalogue and track defect reports against fix data to ensure the contractors are working to the timeframes set out in the Highways Policy).

First responder service (currently via DSFS)

You may have read that SWAST (the Ambulance service locally) has decided to pull the plug on the Fire Service First Responder scheme (operated from the Axminster Fire Station) and rely instead on community voluntary first responders (as ambulance response time in rural areas is so very poor and slow). I believe that this is a terrible idea (I am biased as my daughter is alive today because of the Fire Service response in 2010) and is a poor economic argument saving just £280k pa.

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I have asked the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to summon the CEO of SWAST to their next meeting on 14/7 and will be asking them / challenging them to explain their decision in the face of overwhelming logic to keep it in place. The loss of the First Responder service could also result in the closure of at least one rural fire station in the wider EX13/EX12/DT area.

DCC Creative

If your village hall puts on cultural and creative events (plays, theatre, AmDram, panto etc) you can apply for a share of the new £85m Creative Foundations Fund (via the Arts Council). Worth a punt if there is some long overdue building work needed that they might be able to help cover the costs of.

Grants

I have used part of my first month's DCC Cllr allowance to pay for an annual subscription to Grants Online (a national grant finder database). If I come across anything that might work for the parishes, I'll pass the details on to your Clerk.

EDDC are also launching another phase of their CAP/REPF/SPF Eco-Fund (decarbonisation) shortly which village halls can apply for to pay for things like solar panels, batteries, heat pumps, insulation, EV chargers etc.

I'll circulate details when I hear more.

Devo/LGR – community resilience

As mentioned before, I am heavily involved (both as a Director of DALC) and in my EDDC/DCC roles, with the progression of devolution for Devon. We will know more from national government come November (but probably too late for town and council budget setting for FY26-27) and I am also attending the NALC Power Shift conference on 23/6 in Canary Wharf, and the LGA national conference in Liverpool w/c 1/7 to listen in on the current thinking re: Devo and how it will affect the higher tier councils, but also the lower tier ones that we represent locally. And to ask questions of Ministers and those holding the reins.

Talking to my colleagues in Somerset, and Cornwall, they all rue the day that their County Councils and District Councils were abolished and the Unitary Councils created as the proposed savings never materialised and all the non-mandatory services were simply dumped onto the smaller Councils below (ie. us). They then have to be funded from local council taxation (precept) much to the chagrin of local residents, and thus creating a them-and-us scenario as the larger towns (with the lion's share of the assets and liabilities) have to raise precept while the smaller parishes don't.

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Somerset Council (UA) believes that the inevitable consequence will be the eventual recreation of the “urban district councils” (that pre-1974 entity) which seems ludicrous as the central government planned LGR to dispose of two tiers of local government but may have inadvertently simply created another one by default.

I’ll keep everyone up-to-date and abreast of any developments as I hear about them.

Other news.

At an extraordinary meeting of the Devon CC on 22/5, 17 former Councillors (including Mr Hall) were granted the status of Honorary Alderman of Devon for their eminent and esteemed service to the County during their term of office.

Many thanks.

If there is anything you’d like to raise with me, or discuss, or ask questions about, or require an intervention of nudge with, please just get in touch and I’ll do my best to oblige you.

Kindest regards. See you all soon.

Paul Hayward

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Devon CC

Ps. Please feel free to publish this report on your website.