

County Councillor's Report 2nd April – Ipplepen & Kingskerswell

An agreement has been signed between the County Council and the Government which will see an extra £95 million of national funds set aside to reduce the deficit on special needs education.

Our cumulative spending on education for children with special needs and disabilities (SEND) over the past 10 years is set to create a deficit of £163 million by the end of the 2023/24 financial year and £206 million by the end of this financial year.

In common with many councils, we have been negotiating with the Government for extra funding for special needs education under the so-called Safety Valve programme. We have also set aside £10 million this year to help bring down the deficit.

The new agreement will see the Government contribute £38 million by the end of March with the remaining cash being spread out over the following eight years.

We will contribute a further £5 million a year from its revenue budget and £20 million from reserves to bring the deficit back into balance by the end of the agreement.

The SEND Action Plan that Devon has agreed with the Government includes:

- focussing on improving early intervention through strengthened universal and targeted support
- supporting young people from 14 to 25 to access appropriate education and training and ensure a planned transition into employment, independent living and their next steps into adult life
- ensuring sufficient special school places along with the establishment of Specialist Resource Provision and improved use of Alternative Provision
- working with partners to improve the inclusive capacity of Devon's mainstream schools
- working with partners to improve the way services in Devon – including health and schools – work together to provide seamless support for children and families

Adoption services for Cornwall Council and the Isles of Scilly will join the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt South West, from Monday 1 April 2024. It means that the region covered by Adopt South West now includes the local authority areas of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Plymouth, Torbay and Somerset.

Adopt South West was established in 2018, following the Government's introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies, bringing together adoption teams from neighbouring authorities to create a single agency in the South West.

The aim of a Regional Adoption Agency is to improve the recruitment of adopters, to help children move into their permanent families as promptly as possible and to offer robust adoption support across a wider region.

Many of Cornwall Council's adoption team members have transferred to Adopt South West, which ensures their adoptive families continue to get support from the same familiar faces.

Children with a visual impairment in Devon have helped the Council to design a new custom-made armband and lanyard to help others more easily recognise that they have a disability. And both designs have been a big hit with young people who say that these aids have had an immediate impact and made a big difference to their day-to-day lives.

More than 600 children and young people in Devon live with a visual impairment. But, because it's a disability that isn't visible to others, this can lead to children and young people not being treated with the care and consideration that they are entitled to.

Usually those who are visually impaired use an awareness aid, such as the internationally recognised white short 'symbol cane' or white 'long cane'. But these aids are designed with adults in mind, and children told us at the Council's Rehabilitation Office for Visually Impaired Children (ROVIC) service that they needed something to suit their age group.

One nine-year-old girl shared that sometimes her cane made her feel embarrassed. So, with help from young people, designs for two new visual awareness aids that children felt 'comfortable and confident' using were produced.

Devon has become home to the first registered "habitat bank" in the country. The County Council and Exeter City Council have worked closely with Devon-based BioGains Limited to register the privately owned 3.2 hectare site in Duryard Valley Park.

The pioneering initiative follows the introduction of the new Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) planning laws which require all qualifying planning permissions to demonstrate that development of a site will achieve a net gain in biodiversity of more than 10% compared with beforehand. If developers are unable to deliver habitat enhancements on-site, they can either choose to undertake the work elsewhere themselves or they can purchase them from a provider of a habitat bank.

The habitat bank in Exeter will be enhanced predominantly into lowland meadow, which is a national priority habitat. There will also be around 260 metres of new and enhanced species-rich hedgerow and some small areas of scrub.

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