County Councillor's Report – 7th September 2025

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Reflections on My First Months

Entering politics as a County Councillor and joining a new party group has been a mind-boggling experience. Having worked successfully in the private sector both in the UK and overseas—and having run my own business for 17 years—this transition has been a real eye-opener. A shock to the system.

A fellow councillor recently remarked that our biggest obstacle in trying to improve the council is what he called **"business as usual."** By this, he meant that regardless of who gets elected, little ever truly changes. Eventually, many residents feel powerless and unheard. While this is often true of national politics, my focus here is on local government—and specifically, Devon County Council.

I've observed a system where appearing busy is the norm, and where those who start out eager to make a difference often face burnout and disillusionment. On sound advice, I avoided diving headfirst into every parish meeting and County Hall event. Instead, I paused, stood back, and observed. I've responded to requests for help, but I've also encountered the inertia of "business as usual."

Committee Work

I currently sit on three committees:

- **Investment & Pension Fund Committee**
- **Teignbridge Highways & Traffic Orders Committee**
- **Children's Scrutiny Committee**

It's easy to get lost in the minutiae. Some meetings run far beyond their scheduled time without resolving much. Others have shown me how national government often dictates outcomes, leaving me questioning what meaningful impact I can have.

Reform Party Representation

As a Reform Councillor, I was elected to help challenge the "business as usual" mindset. Despite Reform being the second-largest party at County Hall, we hold no Cabinet seats, nor any Chair or Deputy Chair roles on committees. While there have

been personal friendships formed, the promised collaboration from the leading party has not materialised.

Our group is steadily building its understanding of County Hall's workings—and shortcomings. You'll begin to see motions submitted that aim to bring about change. This will take time and will face resistance.

The challenge was heightened at Thursday 4th September full council meeting with a unprofessional debate on a specific motion from the Liberal Democrats that prompted the walkout of Reform UK Group. Formal Complaints are being submitted which will include breeches of the code of conduct. The criticisms are likely to be extended to the Council Officers for their failure to be effective during this shameful episode.

Key Topics & Updates

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

This is the most significant change facing local government: the abolition of county and district councils and the creation of new **Unitary Authorities (UAs)**. This will profoundly affect how decisions are made and services delivered.

Key concerns:

1. **Inherited Debt** – UAs may inherit debt from Devon County Council and district councils. Teignbridge District Council, notably debt-free with £12m in reserves, could be unfairly penalised.
2. **Financial Pressure** – Indebted UAs will be expected to balance budgets while meeting statutory obligations. Asset sales (buildings, parks, public toilets) may follow. I believe these assets should be gifted to towns and parishes before April 2027.
3. **Democratic Accountability** – There are concerns that UAs may be less accountable and that election processes could favour current ruling parties. I will be investigating this further.

Please engage with the LGR plans and ask questions—the more awkward, the better. This change will be expensive and far-reaching.

Items resulting from the 1st and 2nd Full Council meetings including:

Devon 20's Plenty Campaign

The council has voted to allow new 20mph zones without the previous requirement of three fatalities. Each parish should consult a broad range of residents—not just activists—to determine if such zones are appropriate. The Greens Party motion on the 4th September was passed, but the challenge will be funding. Funding is expected to come from the Parishes.

Banning Phones Usage by School Children in Devon's Schools.

The motion to ban the use of phones by school children during school hours was passed unanimously.

2025 to 2029 Strategic Plan

This was passed but with the Reform Group abstaining. It was clear that Reform had not been adequately consulted in the creation of the plan. We believe the plan has a number of serious flaws, which my Reform colleagues and I will challenge and address over the term of office.

Devon County Council's Reported Debt

As of the end of the 2024/25 financial year, **Devon County Council's reported debt stands at approximately £517.8 million**, which is an increase of £43.5 million (or 9%) from the previous year.

This equates to around **£621 per resident** in Devon.

However, the council has **disputed this figure**, noting that it includes a temporary £10 million loan taken in late March 2025 to implement a new financial system, which was repaid the following week. Even excluding that, the debt remains substantial.

Key Financial Pressures:

The council is **forecasting a £10.1 million overspend** for the 2025/26 financial year, primarily driven by pressures in **social care services**

The **Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)** deficit, particularly related to **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**, is forecast to overspend by **£53 million**

Devon lost its **£10 million Rural Services Delivery Grant** in 2025/26, which has further strained its budget

Budget Context:

- The council's **gross budget for 2025/26** is £1.987 billion, up from £1.837 billion in 2024/25
- Despite this increase, the council is relying on **savings and additional income of £21.7 million** to balance the budget, with a projected shortfall of **£5.1 million** in deliverable savings

This has not been written to cause alarm, but to help illustrate the enormity of the task my colleagues and I face, and how it will shape what we do. We are determined to focus on prioritising essential services, to ensure that every penny is spent carefully and every contract gives the best value. We need to keep the focus on what is truly important for you and our fellow Devonians.