

Report from Devon County Council , March 2023

New Chief Executive

Last week was Donna Manson's first full week as Devon County Council's new Chief Executive. Donna has set out her first impressions of the county and the council, and her focus on engagement in a message to our staff and Members:

"I firmly believe that the people in our Council and our communities are our greatest asset."

Budget

Councillors recently agreed a budget that will see increases in spending on services that support vulnerable children, young people and adults, in response to rising demand for those services.

DCC will be spending 18.5 per cent more on children's services, and 8.8 per cent more on adult social care services. Overall, the Council is budgeting to spend 10.5 per cent more on services than last year.

But, to help pay for it, the average Band D householder will see the County's proportion of their council tax bill increase by £1.49 a week.

The fact is though, the council tax rise, plus funding received from the Government, will not balance the budget book. Spending this much on priority services to meet growing demand without national support means having to make savings in the region of £47.5 million from elsewhere in order to balance the books.

Sadly, there appears to be no rush from County to support communities with 20mph limits, nor indeed is general support of communities a priority as locality budgets are slashed again, **now down to £5000 per councillor**. Likewise the spending allocated on highways will mean that capital projects will be few and pot hole repairs will be a constant challenge. Opposition amendments to the budget to spend a modest amount of reserves to rectify these important issues were defeated by the ruling Conservative majority.

Parents voice frustration with Children's Services

Parents delivered DCC a strong message last month in protest over failings within services that support children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Members of the Devon SEND Parents and Carers for Change (DSPCC) group shared their experiences, and delivered a letter.

"We feel increasingly frustrated by the continual and relentless institutional failings evident within Devon County Council's Children's Services," they wrote. "We all have individually raised our concerns, whether that was to a professional, a SEND caseworker, or by making a formal complaint to Devon County Council."

Julian Wooster, DCC Interim Director of Children's Services, and Donna Manson, Chief Executive, took time to meet, listen and talk to many of the parents.

"We accept that there have been significant problems across the whole system in Devon and that the experience of many parents has not been good," said Julian.

Extra resources have been identified in our budget to strengthen our SEND casework team and to help us compete with other local authorities to recruit and retain experienced staff.

"But," said Councillor Andrew Leadbetter, Portfolio Holder, "We know that this won't be easy and there are no quick fixes."

New photo ID rules for voters

The Government has introduced new rules meaning you need to show photographic identification (photo ID) when voting in person at a polling station. This is a national change implemented as part of the Elections Act 2022. Voters will need an accepted form of photo ID for the local district and city council elections taking place on Thursday 4 May. The deadline for people to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate is Tuesday 25 April 2023.