

County Councill Cottle-Hunkin report to Merton Parish Council 8th September 2025

Great news to report on The Globe in Great Torrington, they reached their £230,000 goal with just a few days to go! They even raised an additional £10k and these funds will go further towards the restoration. The goal being reached means it is now owned by the community, unlocking more than half a million pounds from central government as part of the previous government's "levelling up" funding. Brilliant news for Great Torrington and the surrounding area!

I had a large number of people contact me, including the headteacher of Great Torrington School, in relation to Stagecoach's price hike which took effect 20th July. There was no warning and a lack of communication that this was happening, meaning that many children didn't even have enough money to get home from school (those who travel out of catchment ie mainly those from Bideford). There is also huge concern for post-16 students who saw a massive increase to £444 per term to get to college. Not only this but for everyone more generally with both return tickets and the North Devon zone now scrapped as part of their new ticketing strategy. I raised concern over the price increases urgently at our cabinet meeting and launched a petition which was actively supported by more than 2/3 of county councillors from all parties and rapidly reached more than 1000 signatures. <https://chnng.it/rK7VQ5mfBN>

We have now met with Peter Knight, Managing Director of Stagecoach and have agreed to work more closely in partnership, both to lobby central government in terms of the need for fair funding for our large rural county, but importantly, he has agreed to seriously look at re-zoning and lowering costs for young people under 18 which will likely come into effect in January

2026 <https://www.northdevongazette.co.uk/news/local-news/1870285/devon-mps-and-councillors-quiz-bus-boss-over-rising-fares-for-schoolchildren.html>

At our recent cabinet meeting I presented a report from the public health manager on alcohol harm in Devon. I had to declare that I am not teetotal by any means! But there was real seriousness and shocking statistics in the report, and some of the figures for Devon are double the national average. For example in Devon alone premature death (*which means dying before the age of 74yrs*) from alcoholic liver disease has increased by nearly 42% since 2001 and within the last 10 years alcohol related hospital admissions have grown by 46%. Admissions for alcoholic liver disease have increased by 70%. While nationally we are seeing a *reduction* in alcohol consumption in younger adults (18-34yrs) it still causes significant harm to young people. In Devon, our under-18s hospital admission rate for alcohol-specific conditions are *nearly double the*

national average. <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/cabinet-backs-plan-to-reduce-harm-caused-by-drinking/>

We also agreed a new strategy aiming to increase the number of young people in education, employment or training called “Brighter Futures – Employment, Education and Training Strategy” <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/strategy-aims-to-create-brighter-futures-for-young-people-in-devon/>

And we backed ‘innovative’ proposals to work with children’s charity Barnardo’s to create eight new ‘gap’ homes, specifically designed to house and support care leavers with complex needs in Barnstaple and Exeter. <https://www.devon.gov.uk/children-families-education/news/were-working-with-barnardos-on-new-homes-for-care-leavers/>

Over the summer we had a very interesting day visiting different locations in North Devon and Torridge in relation to DCC-related economy and skills projects and partner organisations. First stop: Node Cowork at Roundswell which is absolutely thriving and it’s great to hear about the innovative businesses which are starting up and growing from this fabulous work space. Particular mention to Julian Dymond from Great Torrington who manages Node and is doing such an awesome job. I know Jules from way back so it was great to see him in more professional circumstances! Second stop: Castle Hill Work Hub, an excellent facility offering flexible work spaces in Great Torrington, a great combination of hot desks, a bookable meeting room and individual private work spaces at the top of the Castle Hill building, at very reasonable rates which include free parking! Third and Fourth stop in the same building: Learn Devon and Bideford Library . It was great to speak to the tutors at Learn Devon who are so passionate about the adults they teach, helping to improve skills and employability for people across Devon, some even enabled to take their exams from home if needed. And upstairs to the truly stunning library, such a fab community space, welcoming various community groups, including knit and natter who were there on the day, as well as all of the events for children and everything else that they do from bounce and rhyme to public health initiatives, oh and don’t forget there are books there too!

Also over the summer, we spent a day on the edge of Exeter with Devon County Council’s economy and skills teams. We visited Exeter SkyPark and Exeter Science Park (including the Zeal Hotel at the Science Park). At the SkyPark we viewed the range of spaces available- from small business units right up to large companies employing more than 200 people. I was so impressed by the Watercress Research Company and the passion and science behind their business and skincare products, with everything sourced and created locally. This is run by an Exeter University Professor and GP duo (Prof & Doc). We then had a visit to Stovax and Gazco, a large employer, researching and manufacturing high quality products right here in Devon. At Exeter Science Park we were welcomed and shown around by the CEO Dr Sally Basker. 800 people are registered to

work at the Science Park which is the collaborative venture of Devon County Council, East Devon District Council, Exeter City Council and Exeter University, structured as non-profit. 25% of the site is currently completed with big opportunities such as defence and offshore energy anticipated in the future. Finally we walked across to the Zeal Hotel within the Science Park, a new, net-zero hotel which opened March this year. The walls and roof are solar pv and generates more electricity than it uses! We learned about the design and the technologies used to build this hotel. They also use local businesses to source food, drinks and products, as well as having their own recipe for sausages 🥰 There are also two trees growing inside the hotel. It was so impressive as well as having a very calming atmosphere, oh and brown toilet paper (it cuts out the bleaching process!)

In the first week of September we had our first big full council meeting which a huge amount on the agenda (the meeting went on all day!). We agreed our strategic plan [Strategic Plan sets out vision for a Devon where "everyone thrives" - News](#), and heard cabinet reports from 3 of our cabinet members. It was a daunting day for me as it was my first time addressing full council on my rural affairs portfolio and taking questions from them. I used this opportunity to speak out for Devon's farming community and will be sending a letter highlighting a number of concerns to central government ministers on behalf of the council.

*The full detail of the motion I referred to can be found here:

This Council recognises the vital role that farming plays in Devon, both as a cornerstone of our rural economy and as a guarantor of our national food security. Our farmers provide high-quality, high-welfare produce, while also managing and protecting the environment for future generations.

Council expresses particular concern at the damaging impact of the proposed changes to family farm taxation, which threaten the future of family-run farms across Devon and beyond and has created emotional turmoil across the country. We urge Government to reverse these changes and safeguard the future of the family farm model.

We further note with alarm the sudden closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) applications earlier this year, and call for their reintroduction, with sufficient funding and long-term support to ensure that farm businesses can plan with confidence, while continuing the good work that farmers do and have done for the environment, driving towards our aspirations for carbon reduction and biodiversity alongside quality food production.

This Council also recognises the importance of fair trade deals that do not undermine British farmers. Trade agreements must ensure a level playing field, protecting our high food, welfare and environmental standards and ensuring they are not undercut by cheaper imports produced to lower standards overseas.

We also support calls for agriculture and food production to be embedded within the school curriculum so that young people understand where food comes from and the importance of farming to our country. We endorse the work of the Farmwise initiative led by Devon County Council, which provides an interactive learning day every year for Devon's children focused on food and farming.

We reaffirm our support and commitment to the Devon County Farm Estate, recognising its contribution to developing the next generation of farmers, supporting local communities, and delivering wider benefits to the county.

Finally, this Council recognises the severe challenges faced by farmers around mental health and wellbeing. We condemn the closure of the Farming Resilience Fund earlier this year and call for increased support and promotion of vital mental health and wellbeing services to ensure it reaches those who need it most.

Council resolves the cabinet member for Rural Affairs and the Chair of Farms Estate write to Government Ministers and Devon's MPs setting out these concerns. Council will continue working with the farming community and in collaboration with partner organisations such as the NFU, to be an advocate for the farming community, and ensure a thriving and sustainable future for agriculture in Devon.

As well as this, we voted to support the Smartphone Free Childhood campaign and agreed a countywide ban on smartphones in schools from 2026. This is a bold step to put children's wellbeing, safety, and learning first. [Councillors endorse principle of smartphone ban in schools](#)

We also passed Cllr Yusef's motion on hate crime, sending a clear message that Devon is a county that stands for tolerance, equality, and respect. Hate has no place in our communities.

Finally, I am so proud to announce this new grant fund we have set up at Devon County Council. Designed by young people, for young people 😊 Please share with your local youth groups! <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/new-grant-fund-laims-to-enrich-the-lives-of-devons-young-people/>

If there are any safety defects or other highways type issues please do report them here: [Report a problem - Roads and transport](#)