

Report for Merton Parish Council Meeting 12th January 2026 from District Councillor Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin

I'm very pleased to finally share some really good news for Great Torrington regarding Stagecoach bus services. After a great deal of work – including petitions, meetings with MPs, the headteacher of Great Torrington School, and the Managing Director of Stagecoach – the Barnstaple Zone has now been extended to become the North Devon Zone. This covers a much simpler ten-mile radius of Barnstaple and, crucially, now includes Great Torrington. The change came into effect on 4th January and has led to significant price reductions for people travelling within the zone, important for so many, particularly those who use the buses regularly to get to places of education and to work. [Major shake-up of Stagecoach bus fares welcomed for North Devon passengers - North Devon Today](#)

Another issue I have been very vocal about during 2025 is the proposed farm inheritance tax changes that are due to come into force in April 2026. Just a couple of days before Christmas, the government announced a partial U-turn, increasing the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million. This was a welcome relief for many farming families after more than a year of worry, stress, as well as wasted money and time spent trying to plan as best as they could for the future, under what would have been a crippling tax. There is still more work to do, but this step was certainly welcome and is testament to the relentless pressure put on the government from all angles and across the whole country! [Welcome concession is a win for farmers and rural communities across Devon - News](#)

There was also some positive news from Ofsted at the end of last year, who praised the progress being made by Devon County for care leavers. They described “considerable progress”, highlighting the clarity of plans, consistency of the service and the commitment shown by teams. Importantly, care leavers themselves spoke enthusiastically about the changes, which is a powerful endorsement of the work being done [Ofsted praises major improvements for care leavers in good news for children's services - News](#)

Before Christmas, a small group of us as County Councillors in North Devon and Torridge also met informally with local foster carers. As we were all newly elected in May, it was especially important to hear directly about their experiences, what needs improving, and what would help support and retain foster carers. There was particular praise for the Mockingbird model, which carers would like to see offered to every foster family in Devon. Our foster carers play such an incredibly important role, caring for some of Devon's most vulnerable children. Devon County Council is now making fostering a clear priority, and last year the Chief Executive publicly acknowledged that

the council had not been doing enough in the past. As a new administration, we are committed to making meaningful changes. Alongside retaining existing foster carers, we also need to recruit more. There are a range of options available, from offering weekend breaks to long-term care, so if you have a spare bedroom and would like to find out more, please visit the Devon County Council website. [Change a young person's life and consider Fostering Devon](#)

Finally, our library consultation is now well underway, with a deadline of 22 February. I am encouraging as many people as possible to take part. There is also a children's survey, which parents of children under 13 can complete on their behalf. The consultation is online, and paper copies are available in local libraries for those who need them. [Have Your Say Today - Shaping Devon's Library Service - Commonplace](#)

Many of you will remember that a couple of years ago I led the campaign to try to save our mobile libraries, which were axed under the previous administration. Years of reduced funding have left our libraries under real pressure, and Libraries Unlimited agreed that a public consultation was needed from Devon County Council to explore new models, and it will start conversations with communities to enable us to develop a long-term strategy.

We are very open about the financial challenges facing Devon County Council; we live in a large rural county and it costs a huge amount to deliver services here in comparison to authorities serving urban regions. Despite consistent lobbying, this is still not properly recognised by central government, and as a result we are severely underfunded. We are forced to find savings which are increasingly hard to find. We are looking at other parts of the country to try and work out positive ways forward. In relation to libraries, we have been directed across the border to Cornwall. There they underwent a Library Transformation Programme ten years ago and most libraries are now managed locally, often with the support of town and parish councils, which has led to a 34% increase in opening hours and greater use of libraries, all while still managing to retain a mobile library service! The book stock, technology and distribution is still owned and run by Cornwall Council but the funding and management of individual libraries (including librarians) is in most cases now run on a local level. [Cornwall Council says local libraries are 'bucking UK trend' - BBC News](#)

In other parts of the country, "open access" technology is being used and has helped to extend opening hours beyond traditional staffed times. Following an induction, library users are then able to access the library using their library card. This is currently being piloted in Devon, and I am very optimistic about its potential. It has been proven to work elsewhere, and would allow greater opportunity for community groups to use the library spaces, provide free study areas for students, and offer welcoming places to access free Wi-Fi etc. [Open Access guidance note FINAL.pdf](#) example of how it works is here: [Bing Videos](#)

Libraries are now so much more than book-lending services – they are vital community hubs. I am absolutely committed to working with our communities to find sustainable, long-term solutions, but local support is essential. This year is the National Year of Reading, so please do visit your local library, sign up if you haven't already, and take part in the consultation. Your support and views really do matter.

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

Grit bins can be requested via [Grit bins and salt bags - Roads and transport](#)

Speed concerns can be raised from the “report a concern” link at [Speeding, Speed Limits and SCARF - Roads and transport](#)

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