

County Councillor's Report 18th April - Coffinswell

A landmark devolution deal for the greater Devon region, which transfers new money and powers into the hands of local Leaders across Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, has moved a step closer with the backing of the Government's Levelling Up Minister, Dehenna Davison.

Outline approval has been given for a Devon-wide devolution deal which could bring greater local control and allow partners to tap into additional resources to help tackle key local priorities such as affordable housing, better public transport and connectivity, and providing for the skills that the local economy needs.

Importantly, the deal would not require a change to the established democratic structures across the area or the need for an elected Mayor as in other devolution deals across the country.

Instead, the new powers would be devolved to a partnership of existing local Councils who would deliver on a joint programme working alongside a wide range of other local stakeholders. Any final deal would require local consent with the full agreement of all the constituent Councils as well as Parliamentary approval.

Welcoming the opportunity and Government's backing for a local deal without the need for an elected Mayor, Councillor John Hart, Leader of Devon County Council and Chair of the local Devolution Partnership said: "This could be an important first step towards getting more local control to deliver on the big issues affecting local people and help us get access to much needed new investment. We have been talking with the Government about this for some time and now it's time to deliver."

Every penny of the extra £9.4 million we received from the Chancellor's budget will be spent on improving the highway network and making sure Devon's roads are more resilient.

Earlier this month we learned that the county's share of the additional £200 million capital funding from the Government was the largest among County and County Council Network unitary authorities.

And at the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee it was confirmed that all the extra cash would go towards improving the condition of the network, including the prevention of defects, surface dressing and skid resistance on key routes.

The lion's share of the money, £5.5million, would go towards the Local Area Capital Programmes, which will reflect local priorities identified through our elected members and Neighbourhood Highway Officers.

Using inspections and survey data, the remaining funding will be directed to preventative works to stop potholes forming in the first place.

Councillor Stuart Hughes, the Cabinet Member responsible for highway maintenance, said that this winter's weather, particularly a freezing December, had had a significant impact on the condition of Devon's 8,000-mile road network.

The Government's new Emergency Alerts system is now live, enabling people to be contacted through their mobile phone in the event of there being a danger to life near to where they are, for example severe flooding or fire in their area. If that were to happen near you, your mobile phone or tablet will receive an alert with advice about how to stay safe.

The Government plans to test the system by sending a national test alarm to all smartphones that use 4G and 5G phone networks, at 3pm on Sunday 23 April 2023. Older, 'non-smart' phones will not receive the alarm.

The emergency alert will appear on your device's home screen and you will need to acknowledge it before you can use other features on the phone. The loud siren will sound, even if the mobile phone is set on silent. You will not receive alerts if your device is connected to a 2G or 3G network; wifi only; or not compatible.

Libraries Unlimited, the Charity that runs Devon and Torbay's Libraries are proposing to stop delivering a mobile library service, because it's become very expensive to run and the number of people using it has fallen considerably over the last few years.

Currently there are four mobile libraries, three of which are 15 years old and at the end of their serviceable lives, and the fourth is nine years old. All of them have become increasingly expensive to maintain. They are unreliable and have spent a combined 670 hours off the road in the last year, mostly because of mechanical issues.

They are also very expensive to replace – to replace all four with new vehicles would cost between £0.5m and £0.8m – and given our financial situation, this is not something we can afford to do.

As the costs of the service continue to rise, the use of the mobile service has fallen significantly.

Since 2013 the number of loans from the service has fallen by 68 per cent while the number of visits has fallen by 73 per cent.

The County Council are seeking the views of users on the proposals, and are asking for suggestions and ideas on how to deliver the service in a different way to ensure that everyone continues to have access to the library service.

The options being explored include improving the current Home Library Service. Dedicated volunteers choose and deliver books, including large print and audiobooks, free of charge and often have time to chat.

They are looking at extending the Good Neighbours service. This scheme involves friends, neighbours and family choosing and delivering books to people unable to get to the library.

Libraries Unlimited also provide an extensive digital service, and want to make better use of the thousands of eBooks, audiobooks, digital magazines and digital newspapers which are available.

The consultation can be accessed here - <https://www.devon.gov.uk/haveyoursay/consultations/mobile-libraries-consultation/>

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