

I would like to acknowledge the female members of the Council's staff on International Women's Day, for their dedication and commitment, particularly over the last two years. Devon is a large employer, and it's the calibre of our workforce that means we're able to deliver the public services that the people of Devon rely on, and rightly take for granted. Today though, it's worth acknowledging the many great women in the council's workforce that work so hard to make the county the excellent place it is to live and to work in.

Devon's Director of Public Health is urging people to stay at home if they feel unwell, with coronavirus, or symptoms of other illnesses that could be infectious. His call comes as Devon is seeing a rise again in the number of coronavirus cases, with the latest data showing a 63.4 per cent increase in cases in a seven day period.

We now see a national rise in cases, and in Devon. We're seeing it across all ages, especially among the working age population. We're seeing it in care homes, we are seeing it in hospitals, with pressures in health and care settings compounded by staff absences due to illness.

Here are five simple things people are encouraged to do.

1. If you have symptoms of coronavirus, or any infectious illness, e.g. a cough or high temperature, vomiting or diarrhoea, or tested positive for coronavirus, please stay at home if you can and avoid seeing others until you are feeling better.
2. Face coverings are still required in health settings, such as GP surgeries and in hospitals. Unless you are exempt, please continue to wear face coverings when in indoor public spaces with people you don't live with. That includes public transport, hospitality and retail settings.
3. Testing, to identify if you are likely to have coronavirus, is important: testing before visiting older or vulnerable friend and relatives, or before going to your GP practice or to visit someone in hospital. If you test positive, please stay at home for five days or until your symptoms have gone.
4. Keep up with your vaccinations - they're proven to help protect you and others from becoming ill.
5. And simple hand hygiene is also still important. It's a simple precaution, but still effective.

Local authority leaders across Devon have spoken out in concern for the people of Ukraine and their families, following the Russian invasion. The authorities have pledged to work together to support Ukrainian refugees seeking sanctuary in the UK and have each condemned Russia's actions.

They have agreed to give particular support to families in Devon whose relatives in Ukraine are fleeing the conflict.

Individually, councils have also taken steps to cut Russian links, such as through contracts for energy provision. And any few remaining investments within the Devon Pension Fund, linked to Russian assets, are being sold off quickly.

Trading Standards is urging householders, particularly the elderly and vulnerable, to be on their guard for rogue traders who might try to cash in on the damage caused by recent storms.

Trading Standards Service is urging householders to always reject offers of goods and services from cold callers, which could include people claiming to be tree surgeons or roofers, and other tradespeople who call or knock on the door uninvited. There is concern that desperate householders may drop their guard and be duped by unscrupulous traders.

Residents can report rogue traders or get advice from the Citizens Advice Consumer Service on 0808 223 1133.

'Let's Talk Teenagers' is a three-part webinar for parents and carers to help them understand and support their teenagers and pre-teens to navigate the challenges they might face as they grow up in today's world. The sessions cover different subject areas starting with communities and family life (March 8) and followed by respectful relationships (March 15) and building stronger families (March 22), all at 7pm.

The course is delivered by parenting experts from the Safety and Resilience Consultancy. The 'Let's Talk Teenagers' project is part funded by the Safer Devon Partnership in partnership with the South Devon Community Safety Partnership, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, and Devon County Council, and Teignbridge Council, and is open to parents and carers from across Devon.

The sessions are delivered on Teams, and a free booklet will accompany the webinar, which will be sent out to delegates after the event. Find out more or sign up for the webinar at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/lets-talk-teenagers-tickets-266793405257>. Due to the success of this there will be another round in June.

Devon County Council approved its lowest council tax rise for seven years – this is because councils are only allowed to increase their budget by 2.99%. In previous years they have been able to increase by up to 3% on top of this for social care- however that was spread over three years but could be used in one go – and so they did.

It means council taxpayers in Devon will be asked for £1,556.46 for a Band D property to help fund vital services for the most vulnerable children and adults and our highway network.

The Conservative budget was approved at the last full council meeting by 35 votes to 12 with seven abstentions. An alternative Liberal Democrat budget was defeated by 42 votes to 12.

But there will still be spending increases of over 10 per cent on both children's services and adult services and health to keep up with a rocketing rise in demand. These increases mask some worrying figures – staffing levels in the Adult and children's services will rise by 498 to 3, 101. We will be spending not quite £1 million extra on these staff to tell people that we are cutting £3.5 million in care and support for older people, £3 million in support for people with learning difficulties and £1.4 million to support people to live independently at home.

When it comes to Highways we are cutting £250k from retaining walls and bridges, £700k from safety work, £120k from network management, £300k from drainage maintenance and £100 from cyclic cleaning (gullies) – this is on top of inflation pressures of £1.56 million. Something I feel terrible about - we are planning to increase waste to landfill by 4,750 tonnes and reducing our recycled waste by 10,000 tonnes at a time when we should be decreasing the former and upping the latter.

Finally, we are cutting £120k from our Locality budgets, £462k for grant funding to communities and £329k for community grants. I guess the one bright spot is that our Libraries are planning to purchase 200,000 children's books

The Council will take £22.9 million from emergency reserves and there will be cuts of £30 million. This is all without the Children's High Needs Block budget which is expected to reach a staggering deficit of £110 million by the end of next year. All in all, a disaster for our County – it did not have to be this way.

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