

Devon County Council met in early January in response to the Government's decision to implement a 'top down' devolution plan for Devon and Torbay which includes proposals for a Greater South West Mayoral Region. This will sweep away local government as we know it – County Councils and District Councils - and replace it with a Unitary Council for an area that has, as yet not been identified.

The recommendations to the Council were to support the Leader of the Council in submitting a letter of intent to Government committing to the Government's programme. This would enable the Council to develop plans for local government reorganisation and deliver a Mayoral Strategic Authority. As a consequence the County Council will request Government to postpone the County Council elections due to take place in May 2025.

This is a hugely important issue – the system is clearly broken. The County Council is virtually bankrupt and people do not understand the different responsibilities of County, District, City, Borough, Parish and Town Councils. The government have said that they wish to see Unitary Councils, which do everything, covering areas of at least half a million people. There would be a larger Regional Council for the South West headed by a Mayor for strategic planning.

The Conservative administration at Devon wish to rush through the proposals – they have not consulted with anyone, let alone the District Councils -so that they will get an extra year in before an election for a massive Unitary Authority covering the whole of Devon and Torbay but not Plymouth.

Simply put, I think this is Democracy Denied and ill thought out. Clearly local government needs reform, and it is obvious that a single Council that does everything makes a lot of sense. However, rushing this through without first consulting voters is fundamentally wrong and I did not support this in Council.

New figures presented to Cabinet in the target Budget show a proposed 8.2% increase in the revenue budget for adult services with a 5.5% rise in children's services and 3.4% for climate change, environment and transport. Full Council set to debate the budget in February.

Reductions in other departmental spending means an overall rise of 5.9% in the budget for next year with a total spend of over £784.1 million.

In a new report, Director of Finance, Angie Sinclair, says there has been a renewed drive across the council to cut costs. But she adds: "Inflationary pressures continue to be felt across the economy, local government and our partners, despite the rate of inflation reducing in the past two years from its peak.

"Social care is particularly impacted by increases to the national living wage which is again increased by above inflation and the increases to National Insurance announced in the Chancellor's Budget."

"This is reflected in the proposed target budgets with total investment of £31.9 million to cover inflation and national living wage plus £33.8 million to cover demand and other spending pressures and priorities. To enable the authority to set a balanced budget, savings, alternative funding and additional income of £21.7 million have been identified.

She says there are no plans to raid the council's balances to boost spending.

“This reflects a strategy of ‘living within our means’ and as such to set service budgets that are affordable within anticipated income and funding totals for next year.”

Angie Sinclair will tell the Cabinet that the target budget includes the loss of £10.1 million in Government support to rural areas. The money is being re-directed to areas of deprivation and Devon will not receive any cash at all. It means Devon has the lowest settlement increase of any of the 21 county councils.

Devon has welcomed a record £83.6 million “early Christmas present” from the Government for road repairs.

The funding of £83,640,000 for Devon is the largest share of a record £1.6 billion investment announced by the Government on Friday 20th December to fill potholes and repair roads.

An extensive repair programme using this latest funding will be compiled over the next couple of months to help tackle the highway maintenance backlog on Devon’s 11,000km road network, which is currently in excess of £200 million. The funding will be used to prioritise extensive surfacing, patching and other preventative maintenance, as well as drainage improvements.

We’ve already embarked on a recovery programme of patching and surfacing through our own £12 million investment earlier this year. The benefit from that work is already being felt and since April, more than 55,000 square metres of road have been patched at around 790 sites across the county. These repairs have targeted sections of road which are deteriorating, patching areas before potholes form.

Alistair Dewhirst - alistair.dewhirst@devon.gov.uk / Tel 07836 704127