

Devon County Council News

July 2025 newsletter to parish councils in Broadclyst Division from Cllr Henry Gent

County Council finances

Towards the end of June a report to Cabinet showed that DCC managed to stay within its £637.5 million budget for 2024/25 and balance the books despite growing demand for services like social care and support for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. £40 million in planned savings were delivered across council services, though this fell short of the £50 million target.

There is an increasing deficit position relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), which is accounted for separately under statutory regulations, with an accumulated deficit of £169.1 m. This deficit has contributed to the fall in Reserves which are now lower than any other comparable county.

<https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=133&MIId=5162&Ver=4>

[We have ended the last financial year in balance - but tough choices lie ahead - News](#)

Local Schools

As I reported last month, there has been a number of children in our area who have failed to gain admission for September 2025 to their first choice school, even when they live in the catchment area of that school. 18 children living at Tithebarn failed to gain admission to reception at Monkerton School, despite living in the catchment of Monkerton. Similarly, at Cranbrook, children have been unable to gain admission to Reception at Cranbrook Education Campus, or St Martins, in some cases. This lack of capacity in the new developments is being managed by transporting children to village schools, some of which, such as Rockbeare, are taking on increasing numbers of children. It is not ideal to be providing extra capacity at remote schools, whilst failing to provide capacity closer to the homes of the pupils. This is particularly the case at Tithebarn and at Cranbrook, where more homes are being completed all the time. At Cranbrook, the Education Campus has got space to expand, and plans to expand, but unfortunately these plans were not implemented for September 2025. At Tithebarn, there is a place for a school, and developer funding to build it, but at the time of writing a Feasibility Study has not been initiated, because the authorities have not decided how to fund the Feasibility Study! I am continuing to meet and correspond with officers, the local MP, and parents and schools, on this important local problem at both Cranbrook and Tithebarn. The Leader of DCC, Cllr Julian Brazil, has taken direct responsibility for schools, and will be visiting our area to find out more.

Personally, I will not rest until all children who live in the catchment area of a school, and put it as their first choice for admission, can gain a place at that school.

Free School Meals: auto-enrolment

Free School Meals (FSMs) are available to pupils whose parents are in receipt of a range of benefits and currently a claim must be made by the parent or another responsible adult before the pupil becomes entitled. Pupil Premium funding is then allocated to schools based on the number of pupils eligible for FSMs or have been recorded as eligible in the past 6 years. It is calculated that nationally at least 10% of families who are entitled to FSMs do not apply to receive them. This could be because of language or technical barriers to application, for example.

We know that if pupils are well nourished, they are better able to learn in class, and this can lead to increased attainment. This is also so important because the associated Pupil Premium funding means schools can offer more targeted interventions and extra support to these students.

As Pupil Premium Funding is allocated to schools based on the number of pupils who are recorded as eligible for FSMs, schools are missing out on at least 10% of their Pupil Premium entitlement if all eligible families registered. This is costing Devon Schools significant amounts of money, possibly in the region of £2 million per annum of additional funding.

A number of local authorities have already successfully adopted the policy of auto-enrolment for FSMs and I am pleased to hear that Devon County Council is looking into this option, with discussions ongoing at Devon Education Forum.

Auto-enrolment of Free School Meals could transform the lives of thousands of children across the county and support Devon schools who are under considerable financial pressure and are poorly funded by national standards.

It is my aim that the process to adopt FSM auto-enrolment is treated as an absolute priority by officers so that our schools can benefit from auto enrolment from the 25/26 academic year. Any delay could be extremely costly to our local schools and children.

Henry Gent 03/072025