

Cllr Andrew Saywell – Report to High Bickington Parish Meeting, 9 May 2018

Good evening everybody,

It is a pleasure to be presenting a report to High Bickington's Annual Parish Meeting. As it is coming up to nearly a year since my election I would like to place on record my thanks to the people of High Bickington for their support and kindness both at the election and afterwards. I regard it as a great honour to represent this village and Parish at County Hall and I strived during the past year to do my best for this parish and the 17 other Parishes that I represent as part of the Torrington Rural division.

As most of you know I am a regular attendee of Parish Council meetings and one of the issues I've been working on in particular is to help improve the poor mobile phone reception that we have in the village. I was pleased to be able to engage with the main mobile phone operators and this coming Friday I will be having a further follow up meeting with BT and EE here in this parish.

As this is an Annual Parish Meeting I wanted to a broader overview of what I have been up to and what has been happening with DCC during the past year.

When I was elected my main priorities were to help kick start efforts to revitalise Torrington's economy, in particular to see a 24 hour cash machine put back into the town centre after the closure of Lloyds, ensure that our main rural roads are properly maintained, fight for fairer funding for Devon's schools, and oppose any downgrades to our local health services, particularly at North Devon District Hospital.

I am pleased that I can report progress on all of these. Thanks to Mark Duffy at Duffy's Hardware store there is now a 24 hour cash machine in the town centre, and there is also a cash machine in the old phone box by Sydney House Car Park. M&S has even come to Torrington.

I was also pleased, working with Torridge District Council's Regeneration Officer Sean Kearny, to be able to secure a meeting with the Chief Executive of the Local Enterprise Partnership, Chris Garcia, in Torrington itself to discuss some of the challenges the town faces, show him the derelict Creamery site, and also what opportunities there are for economic development within the Torridge area.

I will talk more about Highways later but in so far as main roads are concerned, I was pleased after extensive lobbying to see some of the worst sections of the A386 in Merton and Huish and the A3124 get resurfaced. The last section, outside Rosemoor Gardens, which has been in an appalling condition for some time, was resurfaced at the beginning of May. The A377 is also being repaired.

With regards to schools, Devon County Council has secured an additional £7.5m worth of funding from central government, and although there is still much more to do and a long way to go until we get parity with the national average – Devon pupils are underfunded approx. £200 less per child – it is still a considerable improvement from 8 years ago when we were the second poorest funded County in the entire country and underfunded by over £400 less per pupil.

Finally with regards to the NHS, the Health authorities announced that there would not be any downgrades to acute service provision at North Devon District Hospital.

Regarding my work at Devon County Council, I sit on the Council's Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee (which has oversight on Highways among many things), the Childrens Scrutiny Committee and the Audit Committee. You'll be pleased to hear that I am not about to give you an in depth talk about the Audit Committee!

Unsurprisingly, the majority of my casework over the last year has related to Highways Issues. It is now easier to report Highways problems online and I would urge everybody to use the DCC 'Report a Problem' website when logging dangerous potholes or other highway defects.

The website is - <https://new.devon.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/report-a-problem/>

Not only is this the quickest way of ensuring problems are logged, I cannot stress enough that this is a numbers game. The more data received at County Hall about High Bickington and Torrington Rural the more likely it is that a road here, for example, will be resurfaced.

However, more still needs to be done. In January I was pleased that my proposal, with support from my neighbouring ward colleague, Cllr Richard Edgell, to prioritise more resources for improving drainage on the Highway Network was accepted by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee. After all, we can fix as many potholes as we like but it will be no good if water is still left running on the roads!

That recommendation was subsequently adopted by the Council's Cabinet and then the Full Council itself when DCC's Budget was passed. It included an additional increase in the Highways Budget of £6.5m, and will be used specifically to fund improvements to drainage, as well as patching and potholes.

Obviously that budget increase was agreed before the 'Beast from the East' arrived, however since then, the Government has announced that they giving DCC a further £4.5m to help fix potholes and the recent winter storm damage. So I am confident that the £6.5m increase will not get lost in having to repair storm damage.

Having mentioned the website just now, normally DCC has 200-250 potholes reported county wide every day. Following the wintery weather it went up to 600-700! Skanska, the Highways Contractor, have put out extra gangs but the backlog is huge and at the moment they are prioritising the A, B and large C roads first.

Finally, I just want to touch on the other aspects of DCC's Budget. DCC's share of the council tax precept went up by 4.99% - with 2% specifically allocated for Adult Social Care.

I know that council tax increases are not welcome; however this rise helps to fund an increase of 6.1% (£13m) in the Adult Care and Health Budget, and a 5.5% increase (£6.5m) in the Childrens Services Budget. It also helped to fund the Highways Budget increase as well.

I wanted to mention those figures because I have spent most of this evening talking about Highways. But it is not the only thing that DCC does. DCC's Childrens Services Department for example helps look after some of our most vulnerable children in the County.

During my first year in office I have been privileged to spend time with our Childrens Social Workers and I've seen them working in the field, dealing with cases, among others, of children with severe mental health problems through to cases of child sexual exploitation. When I asked the officer how many sexual exploitation cases come through, her response was 'every day'.

We have over 700 children in care in Devon and I regard it as our first and most important duty to look after our most vulnerable children in this County.

It is ironic though, and perhaps somewhat sobering, that these issues are going on and are affecting our most vulnerable children, yet 90% of the casework I deal with relates to Highways issues. I am not saying that Highways are not important, but I do want to highlight that there are other aspects to what DCC does other than just potholes and road closures.

The final thing I want to highlight is that on top of my £10,000 Locality Budget, I will have a further £10,000 for capital community projects and I hope that a scheme from High Bickington will benefit from some funding in the not too distant future.

I'd like to thank the Parish Council for all the work that they do for the village, and I look forward to the coming year and doing what I can to support the Parish of High Bickington at County Hall.

Thank you.