

November 2024 - DCC Monthly Report

Cllr Sara Randall Johnson

An interesting couple of weeks where the impacts of the recent Budget are yet to fully understood, or realised in Devon. Things will no doubt become clearer in coming weeks and months where at the County Council we are expecting to be asked to do more with no real terms uplift in funding.

Broadband

Rewe and many other rural areas in Broadclyst Division are losing out yet in the delivery of high speed Broadband yet again, which is incredibly frustrating following many years of lobbying to be treated equally with other communities and a number of false dawns.

Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) and Airband (contracted to deliver full fibre broadband) have agreed to significantly scale back Airband's contract agreements to deliver full fibre to properties in the two counties.

Both CDS and Airband remain committed to finding possible alternative delivery solutions for those communities who were due to receive fibre broadband.

CDS contracted with broadband supplier Airband, initially in 2016 to deliver fixed wireless infrastructure and additionally in late 2020 to rollout fibre broadband networks to communities across Devon and Somerset, with four contracts originally due to conclude at the end of 2024.

In total, Airband is contracted to deliver 55,493 premises. To date the operator has delivered 18,794 premises in collaboration with CDS.

However, following Airband's restructure earlier this year, the company is seeking to maximise take up across its existing network while slowing down on build activity which means it can no longer complete its contracted build for CDS in full and they sought a change to its contract.

Along with many others, I am extremely disappointed to see a reduction in coverage by Airband via the CDS contract, which directly impacts too many of you. CDS is also discussing alternative options with BDUK, the Government's national agency, responsible for the delivery of Gigabit Broadband.

CDS is urging BDUK to re-enable rural voucher applications to open promptly in communities where Airband will no longer be delivering. This should offer communities a potential alternative. At the same time CDS is seeking confirmation of the Devon and Somerset premises that will be connected under the nationally led contracts awarded to Openreach as part of the Government's Project Gigabit programme.

Devon colleges and council collaborate to enhance SEND education

Colleges in Devon are working with us to provide more places specifically to support the further education of hundreds of young people with special educational needs and disabilities, (SEND).

At least 350 additional post 16 education places for young people with SEND will be created at Exeter College and PETROC College's two campuses in Barnstaple and Tiverton, thanks to a multi-million pound bid to the Department for Education (DfE) and Devon County Council.

The plans involve creating new on-campus facilities at the three sites, Exeter, Barnstaple and Tiverton, with dedicated, purpose-built spaces designed to meet the requirements of young people with a range of additional needs. The courses that the colleges will offer are currently under review and will be confirmed shortly.

The funding from the DfE is essential in providing quality further education, local to families in Devon, that will help young people achieve better educational outcomes, leading to improved employment prospects and independent living.

The colleges are also developing a wide-ranging programme of support for young people with SEND, beginning even before students attend to help make the transitions from school or other educational setting to the colleges as positive as possible.

Devon prepared for winter

Whatever the weather, Devon's highway teams are prepared and ready to keep the county moving this winter.

Last winter's biggest issue was the prolonged wet spell which caused extensive damage to Devon's highway network. This led to a 31% increase in pothole repairs between January and April, compared to 2023, and 94% more than the same period in 2022.

However, in terms of dealing with icy conditions, last winter was relatively quiet, with Devon County Council's gritting teams only using around 6,200 tonnes of salt, which was less than half the amount used the previous winter.

But more time was spent cleaning gullies and clearing debris from roads due to torrential rain and several named storms.

This highlights that Devon's highway teams have to be prepared for all eventualities over the next few months where a generally dry winter would be preferable!

The Morocco - UK Power Project

Positive and exciting news about renewable electricity generation that positively affects Devon. The Xlinks Morocco-UK Power Project will be a new electricity generation facility entirely powered by solar and wind energy combined with a battery storage facility. Located in Morocco's renewable energy rich region of Guelmim Oued Noun, it will be connected exclusively to Great Britain via 4000km (2485 miles) HVDC sub-sea cables.

This first of a kind project will generate 11.5GW of zero carbon electricity from the sun and wind to deliver 3.6GW of reliable energy for an average of 19+ hours a day. This is enough to provide affordable, clean power to the equivalent of over 7 million British homes and once complete, the project will be capable of supplying 8 percent of Great Britain's electricity needs.

Alongside the consistent output from its solar panels and wind turbines, an onsite 22.5GWh/5GW battery facility will provide sufficient storage to reliably deliver each and every day, a dedicated, near-constant source of flexible and predictable clean energy for Britain, designed to complement the renewable energy already generated across the UK.

When domestic renewable energy generation in the United Kingdom drops due to low winds and short periods of sun, the project will harvest the benefits of long hours of sun in Morocco alongside the consistency of its convection Trade Winds, to provide a firm but flexible source of zero-carbon electricity.

Four cables, each 4000km long, form the twin 1.8GW HVDC sub-sea cable systems that will follow the shallow water route from the Moroccan site to a grid location in Great Britain, passing Spain, Portugal, and France.

Agreement has been reached with National Grid for two 1.8GW connections in Devon. Voltage source convertor stations will enable the Xlinks project to secure high value balancing contracts with National Grid, and a HVDC Technical Feasibility study has been completed to validate reliability and cost.

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