

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee Meeting

Date: 20 May 2026

### Outside Organisation Updates from the Councils appointed representatives:

**Brief:**

*The Council's representatives are invited to report on any meetings of the appointed outside organisation, the role the organisation(s) they represent plays in promoting and aligning with the Council's priorities, policies and strategies, their impact and results, and advising on partnership discussions which are open and in the public domain. Feedback is scheduled across a full year cycle once per annum for most organisations and twice where meetings are more frequent (greater than 5)*

Update from: Cllr David Palethorpe

Outside Organisation/Body: Devon Communities Together – Overview & Scrutiny

<p><b>Purpose of the Organisation:</b></p>	<p><b>Introduction</b>  This report provides an overview of the work currently being undertaken by Devon Communities Together (DCT) in partnership with the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP), national agencies, local authorities, voluntary organisations, and community groups across Devon.  The report highlights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The increasing importance of community resilience.</li> <li>• The role of the voluntary and community sector during emergencies and periods of social hardship.</li> <li>• The growing challenges faced by rural communities.</li> <li>• Available grant funding, training, and support programmes.</li> <li>• Opportunities for town and parish councils to engage proactively with DCT initiatives.</li> <li>• Risks associated with underinvestment in rural infrastructure and community support networks.</li> </ul> <p>The report also outlines areas where councillors may wish to consider further strategic support, partnership working, and scrutiny.</p>
<p><b>Attendance requirements/ meetings attended:</b></p>	<p>As required and programmed by Trustees</p>
<p><b>Feedback:</b></p>	<p><b>Strategic Observations</b>  The work of DCT highlights several broader strategic issues for Teignbridge and the forthcoming Unitary Authority:</p>

	<p><b>a) Increasing Reliance on the Voluntary Sector</b>  There is growing dependence upon volunteers and community organisations to support vulnerable residents and sustain community infrastructure.  This raises questions regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term sustainability.</li> <li>• Volunteer fatigue.</li> <li>• Financial resilience.</li> <li>• Capacity limitations.</li> </ul> <p><b>b) Rural Inequality</b>  The evidence strongly suggests that rural communities continue to face structural inequalities in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to services.</li> <li>• Energy affordability.</li> <li>• Health access.</li> <li>• Public transport.</li> <li>• Digital infrastructure.</li> </ul> <p><b>c) Community Infrastructure</b>  Village halls and community buildings are increasingly functioning as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warm hubs.</li> <li>• Emergency centres.</li> <li>• Health outreach locations.</li> <li>• Social support spaces.</li> </ul> <p>However, many remain financially fragile.</p> <p><b>d) Preventative Investment</b>  The report demonstrates the importance of preventative community investment rather than crisis-only intervention.  Relatively modest funding allocations often produce significant community benefits and cost avoidance.</p>
<p><b>Examples of where the brief above has been followed:</b></p>	<p>DCT produce annual report identifying impacts and services provided.</p> <p><b>Background</b>  The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) was established nationally to strengthen coordination between government, emergency services, voluntary organisations, and local community groups during emergencies and periods of significant social disruption.  Within Devon, Devon Communities Together acts as an approved infrastructure organisation within this framework.  The partnership recognises:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The critical role played by volunteers and community organisations.</li> </ul>

- The increasing pressure on local voluntary services.
- The importance of rapid local response capability.
- The need for stronger coordination between statutory agencies and community-led organisations.

The work has become increasingly relevant following:

- COVID-19.
- The cost-of-living crisis.
- The increasing energy insecurity.
- Severe weather events and flooding.
- Growing rural isolation.
- Ongoing impacts of climate change.

### **Emergency Community Support and VCSEP Activity**

DCT and VCSEP provide practical operational support during emergencies and periods of hardship.

Support available includes:

- Transportation and logistics support.
- Food distribution coordination.
- Volunteer DBS checking.
- Emergency volunteer mobilisation.
- Specialist advisory services.
- Support for isolated and vulnerable residents.

Recent examples of support delivered include:

- Nearly 30 metric tonnes of food distributed across the South West.
- Approximately 67,000 meals supported.
- More than 1,000 COVID-19 tests facilitated in care settings nationally.
- Health outreach support for homeless individuals.

The VCSEP model provides local organisations with a single access point for emergency support requests.

### **Contact Information**

- VCSEP support requests: VCSEP UK

General DCT enquiries: Devon Communities Together

### **Rural Vulnerability and Community Resilience**

The evidence collated by DCT demonstrates that rural communities continue to face significant structural disadvantages, including:

- Fuel poverty.
- Limited transport infrastructure.
- Poorer digital connectivity.
- Reduced access to health services.
- Higher service delivery costs.
- Limited retail competition.
- Increased dependence on volunteers.

The “poverty premium” affecting rural residents means many households pay comparatively more for essential services despite often having lower incomes.

These pressures are increasingly compounded by:

- Rising energy costs.

- Inflationary pressures.
- Social isolation.
- Demographic ageing within rural communities.

The report recognises that community resilience is no longer simply desirable — it is becoming essential.

### **Energy Outreach and Cost of Living Support**

DCT's Energy Outreach Project, funded through Citizens Advice partnerships, provides direct assistance to residents struggling with energy affordability.

Services include:

- Energy advice sessions.
- Community presentations.
- Telephone support.
- Advice on government schemes.
- Assistance understanding energy bills.
- Support with supplier switching.
- Home energy efficiency guidance.

Topics covered include:

- Fuel poverty.
- Warm Homes Discount.
- Smart meters.
- Priority Services Register.
- Renewable energy opportunities.
- Home insulation and energy-saving measures.

The project uses trained “Energy Champions” embedded within communities.

Councillors may wish to encourage local town and parish councils to host presentations and awareness sessions.

### **Contact Information**

- Anderson Jones  
Email: [anderson.jones@devoncommunities.org.uk](mailto:anderson.jones@devoncommunities.org.uk)
- Citizens Advice support:  
Citizens Advice

### **Vibrant Villages Initiative (2026–2029)**

DCT has secured £250,000 over three years for the “Vibrant Villages” programme.

The initiative focuses on strengthening rural communities through:

- Supporting village halls.
- Improving community engagement.
- Enhancing local service coordination.
- Building community resilience.

DCT's audit of over 360 village halls identified that:

- Village halls remain essential rural assets.
- Many are financially vulnerable.
- Most rely heavily on volunteers and fundraising.
- Few receive direct public funding.

The programme introduces three Rural Community Connectors who will work directly with local communities to identify needs and strengthen local partnerships.

### **Power in Place Initiative**

The “Power in Place” project has received £80,000 from the National Lottery Community Fund.

The initiative aims to:

- Address rural health inequalities.
- Improve local wellbeing support.
- Build stronger links between communities and health services.

The project particularly targets communities in Teignbridge and Mid Devon.

It seeks to ensure services are designed with communities rather than imposed upon them.

### **Contact Information**

- Jenny Archard  
Email: [jenny.archard@devoncommunities.org.uk](mailto:jenny.archard@devoncommunities.org.uk)

### **Community Wildlife and Environmental Grants**

DCT has also supported environmental and biodiversity initiatives through:

- Wildlife grants.
- Community resilience funding.
- Nature-friendly farming engagement.
- Community environmental projects.

The Connecting People and Landscapes programme supports:

- Farm visits.
- Community workshops.
- Biodiversity projects.
- Nature engagement.
- Access to rural landscapes.

These programmes also strengthen community cohesion and wellbeing.

### **Contact Information**

- Jenny Archard  
Email: [jenny.archard@devoncommunities.org.uk](mailto:jenny.archard@devoncommunities.org.uk)
- DCT website:  
Devon Communities Together Grants and Projects

### **Training and Capacity Building**

DCT provides training in areas including:

- Governance.
- Community development.
- Business support.
- Benefits advice.
- Health and wellbeing.
- Voluntary sector leadership.

Importantly, bespoke training can be commissioned for:

- Parish councils.
- Community organisations.
- Volunteer groups.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Businesses.</li> </ul> <p>The flexibility and tailored nature of this support is viewed positively.</p> <p><b>Contact Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General enquiries and training requests: Email: <a href="mailto:info@devoncommunities.org.uk">info@devoncommunities.org.uk</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Devon Oil Collective</b></p> <p>The Devon Oil Collective supports residents and organisations dependent on oil heating.</p> <p>Benefits include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective purchasing power.</li> <li>• Competitive pricing.</li> <li>• Reduced administrative burden.</li> <li>• Support for DCT community work through participation.</li> </ul> <p>This is particularly important for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural residents.</li> <li>• Village halls.</li> <li>• Community facilities.</li> <li>• Parish-owned buildings.</li> </ul> <p><b>Contact Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devon Buying / Affinity Fuels Email: <a href="mailto:devonbuying@af-affinity.co.uk">devonbuying@af-affinity.co.uk</a> Telephone: <a href="tel:01603 881888">01603 881888</a></li> <li>• Further information: Devon Oil Collective</li> </ul> <p><b>Important Note</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum heating oil order quantity: 500 litres.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Additional information relevant to Overview &amp; Scrutiny including the value that TDC brings to this organisation and/or why this organisation needs TDC:</b></p>	<p><b>Potential Areas for Scrutiny Consideration</b></p> <p>Members may wish to consider:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How local authorities can better coordinate with DCT and VCSEP.</li> <li>2. Whether rural resilience planning is sufficiently embedded within council strategies.</li> <li>3. The future sustainability of village halls and community hubs.</li> <li>4. The impact of rural poverty and fuel poverty.</li> <li>5. Opportunities for enhanced parish and town council engagement.</li> <li>6. Whether councils should do more to promote emergency planning at community level.</li> <li>7. The adequacy of support for vulnerable rural residents.</li> </ol> <p><b>Conclusion</b></p> <p>The work undertaken by Devon Communities Together and the VCSEP demonstrates the increasingly vital role played by the voluntary and community sector within Devon.</p>

The evidence presented suggests that:

- Rural communities face significant and growing challenges.
- Community resilience infrastructure is increasingly important.
- Village halls and community organisations remain essential assets.
- Preventative local investment delivers meaningful benefits.
- Strong partnership working between councils, communities, and voluntary organisations is critical.

Members are invited to note the report and consider how future council strategies, partnership working, and scrutiny activity may further support resilient and sustainable communities across Devon and Teignbridge.