

County Councillor report September 2026:

Proposed Hyperscale Data Centre and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS):

Many of you will already be aware of the proposals by Xlinks for a hyperscale AI data centre and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) on farmland in Great Torrington. From the information we have heard and seen so far, I believe the proposals are entirely inappropriate for our area. The development would remove around 850 acres of productive farmland within the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere Reserve and would directly affect a landscape that includes two listed farmhouses. The visual impact would be immense, with structures visible for many miles across the surrounding countryside.

I would like to pay tribute to the tremendous work being undertaken by the local Action Group, whose volunteers have dedicated countless hours to researching the scheme. [No Devon Data Centre — Protect Great Torrington farmland](#) Through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests submitted to Torridge District Council, they have uncovered a significant amount of information that has helped reveal the true scale of what is being proposed. Much of the information released relates to pre-application discussions between the developer and the council; documents that are usually viewed as commercially confidential have been released publicly through FOI.



Figure 1: plans of the data centre released via FOI

What these documents reveal is deeply concerning. The most striking issue is the sheer scale of the proposal. Two of the largest data centre buildings would each have a footprint of approximately 22 ACRES! To put that into perspective, each building could accommodate the equivalent footprint of 18 Exeter Cathedrals and would be 40m tall. This is not a modest rural development or even a large industrial estate. It would be a monstrous industrial complex unlike anything currently seen in the region.

Questions also remain over water usage. Xlinks has publicly stated that the facility would be self-sufficient in water. However, documents obtained through FOI appear to tell a different story. They indicate that in an extreme dry year (sound familiar?!), annual water demand could be as high as 2.9 BILLION LITRES. Given the increasingly frequent periods of drought and pressure on water resources, residents are rightly asking how such demand could ever be considered sustainable... What is also concerning is that whilst Xlinks has told the press that the proposals being circulated are out of date, the documents released under FOI show these same designs were submitted to the council as recently as April 2026.

This scheme is being described as one of the largest AI data centre developments and battery storage facilities anywhere in the world. I simply do not believe that North Devon's countryside should be sacrificed for an industrial development of this magnitude. I will continue to challenge these plans and support the community's right to have its voice heard. If, like me, you believe this proposal should not proceed, I encourage you to support the

campaign and sign the Parliamentary petition to get it debated in Westminster:
<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/776949>

Bluetongue Outbreak:

The Bluetongue outbreak has been devastating for many livestock farmers across Devon and beyond, myself included. Whilst the disease poses no risk to human health or food safety, the impact on farming families, animal welfare and rural businesses has been profound. [Bluetongue: latest situation - GOV.UK](#)

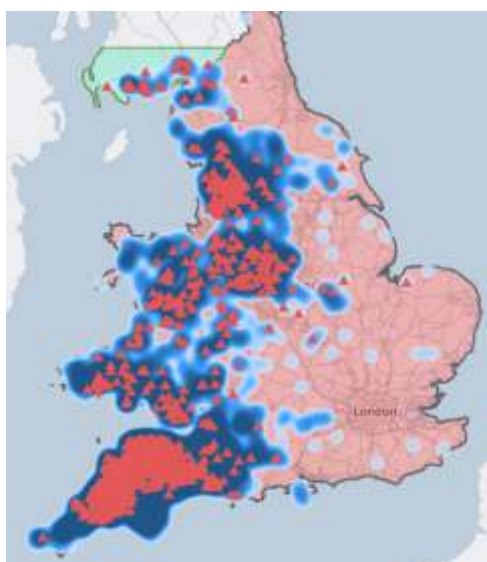


Figure 2: confirmed (red) and suspected (blue) bluetongue cases/infected premises

There are many lessons to be learned from this outbreak, and I believe some very difficult questions need to be asked. Most concerning, here in Devon where the outbreak started, the virus was present and confirmed and yet farmers were left in the dark and were not alerted by Defra. That is quite simply inept and represents a failure by the very government body whose responsibility it is to protect animal health, safeguard welfare and provide confidence to the farming community.

The availability of vaccine has also been a major issue. Many farmers who wanted to urgently protect their livestock found they were unable to access the vaccine due to the high demand and lack of vaccine in the country. At the same time, test results are taking more than 4 weeks to come back, creating uncertainty and making it incredibly difficult to track exactly how quickly and where the virus is spreading.

In the past few days they have started mapping suspected cases in blue, alongside confirmed cases in red, which is something we have been calling for and I personally raised this with Defra at the meeting in Holsworthy market!

What has perhaps caused the greatest frustration is the lack of meaningful support. Farmers have faced substantial veterinary, medicine and vaccination bills, animal losses and carcass disposal costs. Behind the financial impact lies an enormous emotional burden. Watching your animals suffer, nursing them and seeing more and more animals with new symptoms day after day is extremely tough. Dealing with uncertainty and carrying the weight of additional financial pressures has taken a significant toll on the mental wellbeing of many farming families.

Despite this, there has been no support from Government to help those affected at all.

I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to the Farming Community Network (FCN), whose volunteers continue to do an incredible job supporting farming families through what has been an exceptionally difficult



Figure 3: examples of bluetongue symptoms on our farm

period. [Farming Community Network - Farming Community Network](#) I would also like to thank the wider local community, veterinary professionals and neighbours who have been so supportive.

Looking ahead, I am now calling on our local MPs and the Government to work with industry, farmers, scientists and animal health experts to develop a funded, coordinated national Bluetongue strategy to ensure that this never happens again. [Bluetongue BTV-3: Call for a National Plan - Farming Solutions Ltd](#)

At present, the main message we hear from DEFRA is they are "monitoring the situation". That's not good enough. Our farmers feed the nation, care for our countryside and underpin our rural economy. They deserve better than delayed communication, inadequate preparedness and a Government that appears content merely to observe events as they unfold.

Suspension of Birth Services at North Devon District Hospital:

The suspension of births at North Devon District Hospital should never have been allowed to happen.

Earlier this month, the Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust was heavily scrutinised by Devon County Council's Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee, where serious concerns were raised about how the situation had been allowed to develop. The Leader of Devon County Council described the closure as a "catastrophic failure of senior management", reflecting the frustration, anger and anxiety felt by many residents across North Devon and Torridge.

Throughout the scrutiny process, we highlighted the very real risks associated with expecting mothers having to make lengthy journeys whilst in labour- up to two hours in some cases. What makes this situation even more disappointing is that local people were repeatedly assured that the merger of services between Barnstaple and Exeter would make health services more resilient. It certainly doesn't feel like it right now.



I would like to acknowledge the considerable efforts of Ian Roome MP, *Figure 4: Both of my children were born at NDDH* who has been working tirelessly alongside families, healthcare professionals and local representatives to ensure that pressure continues to be applied to restore services as quickly as possible. The Trust has now indicated that it is hoping to reopen birthing services in Barnstaple by the end of September, and we sincerely hope that timeline can be achieved. However, restoring the service is only part of the challenge. There must also be a full and transparent review of how this situation arose and what safeguards are needed to prevent it from happening again. [‘This can never happen again’ – MP demands maternity answers](#)

This issue goes beyond maternity services alone. It raises wider questions about the resilience and fragility of healthcare provision across North Devon District Hospital. If a core service such as maternity can be lost so suddenly, residents are right to ask what pressures may exist elsewhere within the hospital and wider NHS system. Rural communities deserve

the same access to safe, high-quality healthcare as those living in cities and larger towns. Just because we live in a rural part of Devon does not mean we should be expected to accept reduced access to essential health services.

Local Government Reorganisation, Significant Changes Ahead for Devon:

***** 7th September Angela Rayner announced that the planned Local Government Reorganisation for Devon will be paused. Elections for the new Unitary councils will no longer go ahead in May 2027 but there will be elections again for existing District councils *****

What is local government reorganisation (LGR)?

LGR is the government's plan to simplify local councils. Here in Devon, the idea was combining the county council, district councils, city and borough councils into unitary councils.

This principle makes sense in a lot of ways:

- It's a simpler structure (no more having to work out which councillor looks after your bin collections, and which councillor looks after your roads).
- There are fewer layers of government.
- It makes for clearer accountability.

So LGR isn't necessarily a bad thing. But the way central government was enforcing it was a problem for the people of Devon, especially those in rural areas.

What was proposed for Devon?

Councils across Devon put forward 5 proposals for how LGR could be implemented.

The most popular proposal was one big unitary council covering the whole of Devon, leaving Plymouth and Torbay separate (as they currently are).

Central government did not choose this proposal. Instead, they went for one that would have created:

- A larger Plymouth council
- A larger Exeter council
- A larger Torbay council
- One huge authority covering "the rest of Devon"



Why was this controversial?

The option the government chose was ranked 4th out of 5 proposals submitted for Devon - in their own public consultation. This breakup of councils would give more power and influence to the urban areas (Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay), but leave the "rest of Devon" as one vast rural area to fend for itself - this council would have a huge network of rural roads and services to maintain with a much more dispersed population - meaning higher costs and lower tax income.

Lots of residents and councillors were worried about rural communities losing their voice. The approach was also being rushed - we were forced to draw new ward boundaries in 3 weeks, a process that normally takes the electoral commission 18 months.

Why has LGR been paused?

The government has now paused plans following legal advice and a review of the decision-making process.

However:

- Significant public money has already been spent preparing for the changes (££ tens of millions).
- Councils had been asked to work at extraordinary speed to deliver them.
- Hundreds of hours of officer and councillor time has been redirected into this process, which may now not happen.

What happens now?

Local district elections will go ahead in 2027 under existing council boundaries while plans are being reviewed.

This is what I'd written in the report prior to 7th Sept!: One of the biggest changes affecting local services over the coming years is the Government's decision to reorganise local government across Devon. From April 2028, the current two-tier system of local government will come to an end. This means that Devon County Council and the District councils will be replaced by new unitary authorities, with a single council responsible for delivering all local government services in its area.

To help residents understand these changes, the eleven Devon councils have worked together to launch a new website called "Future Devon", which provides the latest information on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), explains why the changes are happening and outlines what residents can expect over the coming years. [Local Government Reorganisation in Devon - Future Devon](#)

Whilst the structure of local government is changing, services will continue to be delivered throughout the transition period. There is a significant amount of work taking place behind the scenes to ensure a smooth handover and minimise disruption for residents.

This is the most significant reform of local government in Devon for decades, and I will continue to keep you informed as plans develop and further details emerge.

Here is most recent info from our cabinet member for LGR Cllr Paul Arnott:

- Devon County Council will consider proceeding with a Judicial Review (JR) of LGR in Devon at its Cabinet meeting on 9th Sept 2026. It has already submitted its draft arguments to government, which were meant to be answered two weeks ago, delayed by MHCLG till 4th September. The JR can only argue for flaws in the processes during the government's conduct of this matter. On the 9th, DCC Cabinet will decide if its own arguments about process are worth pursuing in the light of government's proposed counter arguments, It is anticipated that all districts bar Exeter would write in support of the JR if submitted formally.
- Meanwhile, an immense pan-Devon collaborative process to prepare for the proposed new unitaries in May 2027 and Vesting Day in April 2028 is being led by a Senior Responsible Officer appointed by government, Donna Manson the CE of DCC. Each CE of the district councils has a leadership role working to her on an identified workstream. It is estimated that LGR is creating at least 30% more work for council officers at the moment, who are also having to maintain business as usual, with very little extra government funding. At DCC a Scrutiny Committee meets regularly to discuss and scrutinise these processes as they unfold.
- The response letters from all Devon Councils to the proposed warding arrangements for the new unitaries were completed on time. They were given three weeks and four days to submit to MHCLG's warding proposals, a process which would usually take 18 months. This flows from government's decision to give the Boundaries Commission no formal role at this stage, meaning that a number of glaring errors may not be corrected for five years. Discussions with government on this are ongoing.

- *A letter has been sent co-signed by the leaders of Devon, Plymouth and Torbay Councils to government indicating a readiness to have a Devon Strategic Mayoral Authority for the 1.25 million people in Devon. It is understood that Cornwall may be offered a bespoke non-mayoral agreement. An indicative response from government is likely within a few weeks*

UPDATE from meeting 09/09/26 - Local Government Re-Organisation - Consideration of Impact of Decision

RESOLVED

(a) that the letter dated 7 September 2026 from the Minister for Local Government, Devolution and Regional Growth advising that Government is undertaking a review of the Local Government Reorganisation programme and that decisions made in March 2026 for certain areas have been withdrawn, be noted, including that the fourteen decisions made in July 2026 will be reviewed, and that affected councils have been asked to cease work on implementation pending conclusion of that review.

(b) that the Government's decision to pause implementation and review the July 2026 decisions be welcomed, but note that the Minister's letter does not expressly withdraw the decision of 16 July 2026 insofar as it relates to Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, nor does it remove the Council's need to protect its legal position within the strict public law time limit for judicial review, on that decision.

(c) to request that the Secretary of State and Minister urgently confirm, in writing, whether the 16 July 2026 decision for Devon, Plymouth and Torbay is withdrawn, suspended, or remains in legal effect, and confirm the status of the review and future decision on that review. 4 CABINET 9/09/26 * 21 * 22

(d) that the Leader of the Council be authorised, supported by the Director of Legal and Democratic Services, to write immediately to Government requesting withdrawal of the Devon, Plymouth and Torbay decision, or alternatively confirmation of a formal standstill which protects the Council's position pending lawful reconsideration.

(e) that, if satisfactory written confirmation is not received within a period considered appropriate by the Director of Legal and Democratic Services having regard to legal advice and the public law timetable, approve the commencement of protective judicial review proceedings to preserve the Council's jurisdictional position and avoid prejudice arising from the requirement to issue proceedings promptly, if required.

(f) that delegated authority be given to the Director of Legal and Democratic Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to finalise and issue any further pre-action correspondence, agree any standstill or clarification if legally sufficient, lodge protective proceedings, seek expedition, interim relief, a stay or other protective, ancillary or consequential relief, and take all steps necessary for the conduct and management of the proceedings.

(g) that any decision to issue proceedings is for the purpose of protecting the Council's legal position, statutory responsibilities and ability to obtain effective relief, and should not be taken as preventing constructive engagement with Government, affected councils and partners during the review process.