ANNUAL REPORT FROM COUNTY COUNCILLOR TO ALL PARISH COUNCILS IN PETERSFIELD HANGERS

1 MARCH 2026

This report is my **Annual Report** to Parishes - please include this report in the papers for the Annual Parish Meetings which run from March to May across the Hangers.

1. New budget approved by County Council

In February, the County Council approved its annual budget which included approval of a 4.99% increase in Council Tax. While we are mindful of the cost-of-living pressures our residents face, this increase of £1.54 a week on average will allow us to keep safeguarding vital services for children at risk of harm, our growing older population, and people with disabilities and additional needs. By continuing to make savings and to transform the way we operate, we want to be able to limit the scale of any future council tax increases.

Alongside the revenue budget, Councillors have also approved the County Council's £971 million capital programme for 2026/27 to 2028/29, funded largely through developer contributions and Government grants. The agreed programme includes:

- £178m for structural maintenance of roads and bridges
- £216m for Integrated Transport Plan schemes
- £187m for new and extended school buildings
- £49m to support High Needs provision
- £71m for children's social care, including a new secure children's home
- £124m for condition-based improvements to school buildings
- £47m for waste and recycling infrastructure to improve recycling services

2. A £633m Boost for Hampshire's Schools

At a time when councils up and down the country are teetering on the brink, Hampshire is doing something rather extraordinary: investing hundreds of millions of pounds in the future of our children. In February, Hampshire County Council also approved a £633 million capital programme for new schools, better facilities, and vital improvements to children's services. Ten new schools — including two special schools — and hundreds of additional specialist SEND places will be delivered across the county.

This is only possible because of the careful, responsible financial management we've maintained for years. Hampshire has kept its books balanced, protected taxpayers' money, and ensured we can still invest where it truly matters. This programme will deliver:

- New mainstream and special schools in growing communities
- Over 390 new specialist SEND places
- Major upgrades to school buildings and early years settings
- Investment in Best Start Family Hubs
- Support for foster carers and adaptations for children with disabilities

This is long-term, serious investment — the kind that shapes a county for generations. And it's being delivered because this council has chosen to plan ahead, spend wisely, and protect Hampshire's future. I'm proud of what we're achieving for our young people. This is what responsible leadership looks like — and Hampshire's families deserve nothing less.

3. Hampshire Highways

I would like to acknowledge that this has been a challenging year for Hampshire Highways. In fact, it has been the worst year since I was elected nine years ago in 2017. On behalf of everyone at Hampshire County Council I would like to say sorry to all residents for the poor state of the roads so far this year.

What has made this year so bad is the persistent rain combined with overnight freezing. It is impossible to fix potholes properly when it is raining, or when the road surface is below 8 degrees. As you all know, there has been no let-up since Christmas. This has never happened before. As soon as we get a dry fortnight, I am confident that the teams will get out there and address all the defects rapidly. We have brought in extra crews and additional equipment such as dragon patchers.

We have truly excellent people at all levels in Hampshire County Council. They are professional, hardworking and conscientious. They are doing their very best to rectify the situation in challenging circumstances.

The problems arise due to increasingly wet winters, more vehicles, heavier vehicles, and a lack of routine investment. **Given the impacts of climate change, I believe we should now be routinely resurfacing ALL of Hampshire's 5,500 miles of road every seven years.** This would make our roads more resilient to the changing weather. To do this would probably cost ten times what we currently spend on Highways (which is around £60m per year). Unfortunately, there is no short-term prospect of this happening.

Sadly this means we will be hostages to the weather in Hampshire until we get more funding for our roads.

4. Devolution and Local Government Reform

The challenge of fixing our road infrastructure and calming traffic will be a key issue for the future Mayor of Hampshire. For absolutely no good reason, the Labour Government has delayed our Mayoral election until 2028. I found this incredibly disappointing. We really need a Mayor to fight our corner and to lobby for more investment in infrastructure.

We also need Local Government Reform, which will help to close our budget gap by delivering savings and efficiencies. I sincerely hope that we can stick to the current timetable and hold elections to the new Unitaries in May 2027. At present, there is no certainty about that.

By the way, I think Hampshire County Councillors have been vindicated in our decision to refuse to request a delay to our elections this year. Ministers were encouraging us to do so but we thought it was wrong and we stood firm. Our principled stance was right, and the Government was forced into a u-turn on their election delays. There is now real concern that the process of LGR will be delayed due to the Labour mix-up over elections. As a result of the mix-up, most of the department's LGR funding (£67m) has had to go to the 30 areas which now need to organise elections at short notice. That means less for us.

I have decided to take a break from politics so I am not standing for election in May. In due course I shall look forward to wishing all the best to my successor as County Councillor.

5. Update: Hampshire Forest Partnership

Since it was founded by me in 2022, the Hampshire Forest Partnership (HFP) has now delivered 177,008 trees across over 500 sites in Hampshire. We are well on our way to achieving our target of one million trees by 2050!

For context, the Trees for the Downs scheme run by the South Downs National Park has delivered 117,700 trees across 150 sites in Sussex and Hampshire since 2019, including 3,500 disease-resistant elms. The 177,008 total includes the following key delivery strands:

- Hedgerow planting: 118,842 hedge whips, equating to approximately 23.8km of hedgerow, delivered through Shoots Along the Routes and Linking Leaves (funded through Trees Outside Woodland Fund (TOW), Hampshire County Council (HCC), and partner contributions).

- Community orchards: 42 new community orchards, delivering 765 fruit and nut trees, funded through the King's Coronation Living Heritage Programme.

- Mini forests: 14 mini forests, delivering 16,190 trees, funded through the King's Coronation Living Heritage Programme and other partners.

- Disease-resistant elm trees: 5,840 trees, delivered through multiple funding schemes over successive years, enabling this important project to continue annually.

- Standard trees in parks and public open spaces: 457 trees (included within the Linking Leaves and Elm delivery totals), funded through the Local Authority Treescapes Fund (LATF) and Trees Outside Woodland Fund (TOW).

- Trees for gardens: 4,439 trees, funded solely by Hampshire County Council. Individual trees: 30,932 individual trees delivered through Shoots Along the Routes and Linking Leaves (LATF and TOW).

All of the above tree planting has been delivered through the Hampshire Forest Partnership's strategic bidding for external funding, complimented by some HCC funding, linked to countywide programmes such as 'Shoots Along the Routes' and 'Linking Leaves', which focus on strategically important habitat and connectivity projects across Hampshire, working with farmers, businesses, charities and local communities.

6. Local Nature Reserves

I would like to highlight the opportunity for Town and Parish Councils to create Local Nature Reserves. Nature recovery is a key priority in the new Partnership Management Plan of the South Downs National Park. Town and Parish Councils can play a crucial role in nature recovery by identifying pockets of land which can be converted into Local Nature Reserves. As well as supporting local wildlife, this can also become a wonderful amenity for the community.

Often there are forgotten or neglected bits of land which people have stopped noticing. This was the case with the Tor Way triangle in Petersfield, which we have now renamed the Love Lane Space for Nature. I would encourage you to look closely at hidden parts of your Parishes and see whether a Local Nature Reserve could be created. It is easy to designate a Local Nature Reserve, but you do have to consult Natural England by emailing them at enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk. You should state that you want to declare a local nature reserve and include a management plan detailing:

- Site map and ownership of the land
- any nature reserve agreements, leases or partnerships
- why the local nature reserve site was chosen: aims and objectives
- biodiversity management and environmental education
- community participation, access and visitor management
- costs and funding arrangements

7. Tackling Problem Pavement Parking in Hampshire

Pavement parking is one of the issues I hear about regularly — and for good reason. When cars block pavements, it isn't just inconvenient. It can be dangerous and deeply unfair to people who rely on clear, safe routes: wheelchair users, those with sight loss, older residents, and parents with buggies and prams. It also damages our verges and leaves some communities looking uncared for.

The Government has now confirmed that new legislation is on the way to give councils like Hampshire County Council far greater control over pavement parking. This is something I've long argued for, and I welcome the change.

Under the new proposals:

- Local transport authorities will be able to prohibit pavement parking across their areas, rather than dealing with it street by street.

- A new regulatory framework will allow councils to tailor solutions to local needs, including accessibility and disabled parking.

From 2026, councils will also be able to enforce against unnecessary obstruction of pavements as an interim step, giving us more ability to act where parking is clearly causing problems.

Most drivers are considerate, but the small minority who park without thinking create real barriers for others. These new powers will help us protect vulnerable residents, keep pavements clear, and prevent the sort of verge damage that blights too many neighbourhoods.

8. Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs)

The noise and nuisance caused by motorbikes and 4x4s continues to be a blight on our communities and our green lanes. I have lobbied persistently on this issue and there has been a chance of policy at Hampshire County Council. We now have more winter closures, more gating and more noticeboards.

We also have a proposed Traffic Regulation Order from Hampshire County Council to close Buttons Lane in Colemore. This is important progress but more needs to be done. The damage and disturbance is completely unacceptable. I am grateful to all the Parish Councillors who keep up the pressure on this issue.

9. Summary of grants awarded by me

For transparency, every year I publish my list of grants awarded. Here is the list for the year ending March 2026. As you know, the County Councillor grant pot was reduced to £5,000 for this municipal year.

Organisation	Project Title	Amount Awarded
Greatham Community Hub	Facilities and Shelter for Coffee Hub	£750
Petersfield Cricket Club	Replacement of Heath Pavilion Roof	£800
Friends of Sheet School	Wildlife garden design, refurbishment and re-generation	£750
Steep Film Society In Memory Of Sir Alec Guinness	Replacement Projector	£300
Froxfield and Privett Garden Club	Froxfield Village Hall Window Boxes	£100
Hawkley Parish Hall	Hall redecoration and window Replacement	£500
1st Liss Scouts	Outdoor activity - equipment refresh	£500
Free Shop Friday (Petersfield)	To purchase a new main door to our building.	£300
Liss Archaeology	Improve surveying capability - purchase of an Emlid Reach device	£500
Families of Liss Schools (FLIS PTA)	Liss Schools playground improvement plan	£500
		£5,000

My final monthly County Councillor report will be sent out on 1 April 2026.

RUSSELL OPPENHEIMER
County Councillor for Petersfield Hangers