Parish Council Unitary Councillor's Report – March 2026

Five topics this time.

1. **Wiltshire Council agrees 2026/27 budget.**
2. **Government changes for SEND (Special Educational Needs & Disabilities).**
3. **Gully emptying and drainage maintenance programme.**
4. **Update on countywide effort to tackle rising pothole numbers.**
5. **Area Boards and how they work?**

1. Wiltshire Council agrees 2026/27 budget

The new budget for 2026/27 and the 3-year Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was finally approved at Full Council on 24th February. I had feared that we might be there until midnight, but Council took just under eight hours to discuss amendments and reach agreement on the budget. I would like to thank the Chair for helping us to get there.

Cllr Ian Thorn, Leader of Wiltshire Council, said: "We're delighted that this budget has been approved by Full Council and I'd like to thank officers, staff, and members across all parties for their hard work in helping to develop it. This budget balances the need to support those who rely on us most with the need to invest in the future of Wiltshire. It enables us to continue delivering on our priority areas: supporting people to live fulfilling lives; protecting and strengthening our communities; improving opportunities for children and young people; enhancing our environment; promoting healthier lives; and helping the economy work for everyone. National funding continues to fall short – particularly for rural counties like ours – but now that this budget has been agreed, we are determined to continue the hard work of delivering strong services, protecting vulnerable residents, and investing in the priorities our communities care about."

I, of course, fully support these comments.

For more detail, please click on the link below. If you have a spare eight hours you can also watch the whole thing!

Agenda - Democratic Services - Wiltshire Council.

Finally, along with 124 other local authorities, Council approved a 2.99% general Council Tax increase, plus a 2% Adult Social Care levy.

2. Government changes for SEND-related deficits

The government has confirmed it will write off approximately 90% of the historic SEND budget deficits that councils across the country have accumulated up to the end of

2025/26. This is welcome news, but it will still leave a residual deficit for 2025/26 for the council to fund which is estimated to be in the region of £15m (already in the budget).

While we await further details from government, the initial picture seems far more positive than before. We now look forward to seeing the government's long-term SEND strategy. We expect more information soon and hope it leads to a system that is fit-for-purpose and works better for everyone.

3. Gully emptying and drainage maintenance programme

The council manages over 85,000 gullies across more than 2,500 miles of road, and keeping these drainage systems clear is a key part of preventing localised surface water flooding. Throughout the year, teams carry out both scheduled and reactive work based on local demand to keep water flowing and roads safe.

Gullies on A and B roads are cleared annually, while others are serviced on a two-year programme. In addition, around 5,000 high-risk gullies, such as those more prone to flooding or located in vulnerable areas, receive a targeted annual visit. Other gullies are emptied on demand, when blockages are reported by the public and town and parish councils.

To deliver this work efficiently, the council operates three high-pressure jetting machines that respond to reports from residents, as well as three additional tankers (Vactors) dedicated to the scheduled cleaning programme.

Cllr Martin Smith, Cabinet Member for Highways, said: "Flood prevention is a year-round priority for us, and our teams are constantly working across Wiltshire to keep drainage systems functioning properly. However, during periods of persistent heavy rain, river and groundwater levels can rise significantly and, when the ground is already saturated, there are limits to what gully emptying alone can achieve, as the drainage system cannot take additional water. Emptying gullies will not resolve flooding if the river or groundwater levels are too high – as there is nowhere for the water to go.

"With the continued wet weather, we are closely monitoring high-risk areas and responding quickly to reports, and we really value residents' support in reporting blocked gullies and taking simple steps to prepare during periods of heavy rain."

Residents can stay informed by registering for flood warnings and enabling Met Office weather alerts at https://www.gov.uk/get-flood-warnings, and by checking their flood risk using the Environment Agency's flood map at https://flood-map-for-planning.service.gov.uk/.

4. Updates on countywide effort to tackle rising pothole numbers

As heavy rain continues to fall across the county, Wiltshire Council and its contractors are working around the clock to repair potholes across the road network. Alongside its regular highway maintenance crews, the council has directed all 18 Parish Stewards to concentrate exclusively on repairing potholes that meet the council's defect criteria over the next few weeks, helping to tackle the growing number of issues.

We have now had persistent and heavy rain on nearly every day so far this year, and it is taking a toll on our highways network.

We have seen a rise in potholes on some Wiltshire roads, and we are working hard to address these issues as quickly as we can.

We were making progress on potholes – reports in 2025 fell by 28% compared to 2024 and we were also rated in the top 16 councils by the Department for Transport (DfT) for having good local road conditions. The recent adverse weather has obviously highlighted that there is a lot more to do.

We are ploughing an extra £5m into preventative road maintenance, for the next three years over and above the grant that the Department for Transport gives us. This is the only way we can make our roads more resilient to the weather.
I encourage anyone who spots a pothole to report it to us using MyWilts.

When a pothole is reported to the council it is assessed and then scheduled for repair based on the priorities set out in the council's highways inspection manual. The largest potholes are assigned priority 1 and will be fixed within one day; priority 2 is within two weeks; and priority 3 is 28 days.

5. How much do we know about Area Boards and how they work?

On 18thFeb, the Bradford on Avon Area Board met in Westwood. Parish and Town Councillors were invited to come early for an informal exchange. One of the things which quickly became apparent was that some people did not really understand what the Area Board is, how it works, how its organised and what the purpose is. So, I thought it might be helpful to summarise again.

I think residents are more aware of what LHFIG brings in the way of small highways and streetscene project funding, but the Area Board also offers small community

grants. Recent examples include: funding for Winsley Village Hall, Freshford and Limpley Stoke Community Farm, Women Up (safe space for women).

What the Bradford on Avon Area Board Is

The Bradford on Avon Area Board is one of 18 Area Boards set up by Wiltshire Council to bring decision-making closer to local communities, supported by devolved budgets and delegated authority. These Boards enable residents, partners, and councillors to work together on community priorities, fund projects, and respond to local needs.

Our community area includes the parishes of **Atworth, Bradford on Avon, Holt, Limpley Stoke, Monkton Farleigh, South Wraxall, Staverton, Westwood, Wingfield, and Winsley**.

See here for more detail. https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/article/6142/Introduction

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How the Area Board Is Structured

The Area Board is primarily composed of:

- Four Wiltshire Councillors representing the Bradford on Avon community area.
- Support from Wiltshire Council's Engagement & Partnerships Team, including a Strategic Engagement and Partnerships Manager (SEPM), an Area Board Delivery Officer, and an Area Board Support Officer. These roles help coordinate engagement, organise meetings, facilitate local action, and support project development.

The Board works closely with:

- Town and parish councils
- Voluntary and community groups
- Youth and wellbeing organisations
- Police, fire, health, and other statutory partners

It also coordinates working groups, such as the Local Highways and Footpath Improvement Group (LHFIG), which develops and prioritises local infrastructure projects. [opencouncil.network]

How the Area Board Works

Area Boards operate through:

Public Business Meetings

- Grant decisions
- Partner updates
- Community issue discussions
- Reports from working groups (e.g., highways)

See an example meeting from last year here [opencouncil.network]

Grant Funding and Budgets

Boards receive devolved budgets to support:

- Community and voluntary sector projects
- Youth activities
- Health and wellbeing initiatives
- Local highways and footpath improvements

This funding supports local priorities and strengthens community-led action.

Ongoing Engagement

The Engagement & Partnerships Team ensures a network of local partners is involved through:

- Workshops and events
- Surveys and consultation
- Business meetings and community forums

Together, these elements make the Area Board a platform for grassroots decision-making and collaboration.

Nigel White, Unitary Councillor for Winsley and Westwood ward
March 1st, 2026