

COUNCIL

9 January 2025

Present:-

Chair: J Hart

Vice-Chair: P Maskell

Councillors T Adams, M Asvachin, Y Atkinson, S Aves, J Bailey, J Berry, F Biederman, J Bradford, J Brazil, P Bullivant, R Chesterton, I Chubb, A Connett, P Crabb, R Croad, A Davis, A Dewhurst, R Gilbert, R Hannaford, M Hartnell, J Hawkins, L Hellyer, P Henderson, J Hodgson, S Hughes, S Randall Johnson, S Khan, A Leadbetter, C Leaver, D McGeough, J McInnes, J Morrish, R Peart, P Prowse, R Radford, I Roome, L Samuel, P Sanders, A Saywell, R Scott, D Sellis, C Slade, D Thomas, J Trail BEM, P Twiss, C Whitton, J Wilton-Love and J Yabsley

Apologies:-

Councillors D Barnes, J Brook, H Gent, G Gribble, I Hall, F Letch MBE, M Squires and M Wrigley

335 Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members they should declare any interests they may have in any item to be considered, prior to any discussion taking place on that item. The details of District and or Town and Parish Twin Hatters was on the attached list - [County councillors who are also district, borough, city, parish or town councillors](#)

The Director of Legal and Democratic Services then reminded members of the advice they had already received and that they all had a general dispensation to be able to speak and vote in this debate. The general dispensation covered membership of other authorities. The only exception was where the issue was a matter of dispute between the County Council and the other authority and the matter would affect the financial position of that other authority, the County Councillor could speak on the matter provided they then withdraw from the meeting room.

Those members who were also councillors on another authority were advised to declare a personal interest if they intended to speak in the debate about that council. Members were also advised to be mindful of predetermination if they had already voted at another authority on this matter.

336 Announcements

The Chair of the Council reported on the passing of former Town, District and County Councillor Sylvia Russell and Alderman Saxon Spence CBE, former

County Councillor and Leader of the Labour Group. A full announcement would be given at the February Council meeting.

337 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

There was no item raised as a matter of urgency.

338 Public Participation: Petitions, Questions and Representations

There was no petition received from a member of the public.

There were also no questions or representations from the public.

339 Questions from Members of the Council

In accordance with the Council's Procedure Rules, the Leader provided written responses to one question submitted by a Member of the Council on the following.

1. Leader statement on a Unitary Council and consultation with others, including District Councils.

The Leader responded orally, as appropriate, to a supplementary question arising therefrom.

(A copy of the question and answer are appended to the minutes and any supplementary questions and answers may be observed through the [webcast of this meeting](#))

340 English Devolution White Paper: Government Invitation for Local Government Reorganisation

All Members of the Council had been granted a general dispensation to allow them to speak and vote in the debate on this matter arising therefrom as a consequence of being a councillor of another authority within Devon.

(Councillor Thomas declared a personal interest in this matter by virtue of being a Member of South Hams District Council).

The Council considered the Report of the Chief Executive on the English Devolution White Paper. The purpose of the report was to set out the next steps for the County Council in its response to the Government's English Devolution White Paper published on 16 December 2024 and subsequent communications from the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution.

The White Paper made it clear that the Government "will facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for two-tier areas" (English Devolution White Paper) in parallel this would support the delivery of Mayoral

Strategic Authorities. This was an ambitious and complex programme moving at a fast pace, with significant details relating to timelines not yet fully determined or clarified. It was important to note that a key context to all of this was the need for public sector reform to create a local government infrastructure that works efficiently and effectively with key partners and can “be sustainable and resilient to financial shocks and deliver high quality services”. In addition these new structures would connect public sector services, local and national government and would “shift the balance of power, but this must happen at the right level and to strong institutions able to deliver” (English Devolution White Paper).

The Report was not intended to address any proposals for Local Government Reorganisation. Local Authorities were expected to develop full proposals for reorganisation in line with Government guidance to be issued in January 2025, working with and alongside partners to develop plans for sustainable unitary structures.

The process for these steps would be clarified by the Secretary of State dependent upon elected members decision on the next steps and if the County Council was selected for inclusion on the ambitious reorganisation programme. In such an instance further reports and decision would be required through the County Council’s governance arrangements.

The Government had set out a timetable for the areas to develop devolution and reorganisation proposals at pace. This included different options with either the offer of a Devolution Priority Programme for areas wanting to move quickly with deeper devolution proposals (which would include mayoral proposals) or where reorganisation was needed to unlock further devolution options an accelerated reorganisation and Authorities need to confirm this position by 10 January 2025.

In these instances, Authorities would prioritise reorganisation and devolution. For those Authorities indicating a desire to be part of the proposal who have a local election in May 2025, the letter of 16 December indicated that they could request the local election be delayed for 12 months to enable reorganisation and or devolution. The Local Government Minister had been clear that they secondary legislation would be required to delay an election, to help areas deliver reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframes. This would provide the capacity on which reorganisation proposals could progress at pace in 2025 to ensure the benefits of devolution for the area were realised as quickly as possible.

Irrespective of the inclusion or not on the Devolution Priority Programme, all areas were expected to produce local government re-organisation plans by Autumn 2025 which will replace the current landscape of two-tier authorities and small or failing Unitary Councils with larger and more resilient Unitary Councils.

There were significant devolution benefits articulated in the White Paper in relation to a Mayoral Combined Authority for an Area (see appendix 1,2 and 4 to the Report). There had been ongoing discussions with Cornwall, Plymouth, and Torbay Councils. It had not been possible to reach an agreement.

Information to date was that the Minister had made it clear that interim plans for reorganisation had to be submitted by March 2025 with final proposals by either May 2025 or Autumn 2025.

It was recommended that the County Council supports the Leader to submit a letter of intent to Government committing to the Government's ambitious programme, providing capacity to enable the Council to develop plans for local government reorganisation and to enable deeper devolution discussions to be undertaken. It was proposed that this proactive approach would give the County Council the best opportunity to self-determine and shape both reorganisation and devolution proposals in the best interests of its residents and communities, within the challenging timescales set by Government.

As a consequence of the decision the County Council would also request from Government a 12- month postponement of the County Council elections due to take place in May 2025, and Local Government Reorganisation proposals would be submitted to Government by May 2025 as requested. The purpose of the Report was not to consider any future detailed reorganisation proposals at this stage, as the guidance had not been received from Government but to agree the approach, as requested by government.

The Impact Assessment had been made available to all Members of the Council and was available at <https://www.devon.gov.uk/impact/english-devolution-priority-programme>. This recognised that all residents would be impacted by Local Government Reform (LGR) and deeper devolution but that change was likely to be more impactful under due to the potential reorganisation of services. There would be opportunities to improve a range of outcomes (social, educational, health, economic etc.) across all sections of society under LGR. A delay to the local elections is unlikely to negatively impact any community group; a delay is more likely to be less confusing for people who may experience difficulties with periods of unsettlement and change, or making arrangements to vote (particularly older and disabled people, or people whose first language is not English).

The Leader informed members that whilst he had the ability to directly respond to the Government on this issue he asked that this be brought before the full Council so that there could be a debate. He commented that it was clear that the Government wanted to sweep away county and district councils and bring in unitary councils uniformly across all England. He further spoke about the timeline, the emotional situation for both district and county councillors, the proposal to postpone elections, the guidelines around the size of new unitary authorities, the amount of work in the process and the importance of being part of the programme.

Councillor McInnes **MOVED** the recommendations in the Report outlined below and this was **SECONDED** by Councillor Davis:

- (a) *Support the Leader of the Council to submit a letter of intent to Government committing to the Government's ambitious programme enabling the Council to develop plans for local government reorganisation and deliver a Mayoral Strategic Authority.*
- (b) *As a consequence of joining this ambitious programme the County Council will make a request to Government to postpone the County Council elections due to take place in May 2025 to provide the capacity on which reorganisation and mayoral devolution can progress at pace in 2025 to ensure the benefits of reorganisation and devolution for the area are realised as quickly as possible.*

There was then further debate where a number of councillors outlined their reasons for and against the recommendations. Issues raised included the need for the Council to be proactive, concerns about the proposed size of a new authority, lack of clarity around the proposals, apprehension that a unitary authority would save money, discussions with other Devon and neighbouring authorities, postponing elections, delivery of council services and meeting the needs of residents, lack of communication, potential to lose experienced officers, lack of public consultation, the Government commitment to make local government changes, benefits to communities, current confusion of existing two tier system, opportunities for more effective local government, consideration for the aspirations, needs and desires of communities, concerns about the pace of the proposals, working with Government, ensuring rural and urban communities interests were represented, ability to access funding, potential for parishes and towns, recognition that proposals were being put forward by other authorities in Devon.

Councillor Whitton stated she welcomed recommendations (a) and (b) in the Report but proposed an amendment to insert the following:

c) The council will thereafter work at pace to develop full proposals for reorganisation in line with Government guidance which will be issued in January 2025, working with and alongside partners to develop plans for sustainable unitary structures which meet the needs and aspirations of the varied localities within the Devon area, including those of Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay as well as the coastal and market towns and rural areas.

Councillor Whitton **MOVED** the amendment which was **SECONDED** by Councillor Adams.

Councillor McInnes **MOVED** and Councillor Davis **SECONDED** to accept the amendment and so the revised motion put forward was:

That the Council agrees to:

- a) Support the Leader of the Council to submit a letter of intent to Government committing to the Government's ambitious programme enabling the Council to develop plans for local government reorganisation and deliver a Mayoral Strategic Authority.
- b) As a consequence of joining this ambitious programme the County Council will make a request to Government to postpone the County Council elections due to take place in May 2025 to provide the capacity on which reorganisation and mayoral devolution can progress at pace in 2025 to ensure the benefits of reorganisation and devolution for the area are realised as quickly as possible.
- c) The council will thereafter work at pace to develop full proposals for reorganisation in line with Government guidance which will be issued in January 2025, working with and alongside partners to develop plans for sustainable unitary structures which meet the needs and aspirations of the varied localities within the Devon area, including those of Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay as well as the coastal and market towns and rural areas.

Councillor Bailey **MOVED** and Councillor Bradford **SECONDED** that the vote be taken by roll call.

The Motion was put to the vote and declared **CARRIED**.

(In accordance with Standing Order 32(2) Councillors Adams, Atkinson, Aves, Berry, Bullivant, Chesterton, Chubb, Crabb, Croad, Davis, Gilbert, Hannaford, Hartnell, Hawkins, Hellyer, Henderson, Hughes, Khan, Leadbetter, Maskell, McGeough, McInnes, Morrish, Peart, Prowse, Radford, Randall Johnson, Roome, Samuel, Sanders, Saywell, Scott, Sellis, Slade, Trail, Twiss, Whiston, Wilton-Love, and Yabsley voted for the motion (Total: 39)

Councillors Asvachin, Aves, Bailey, Biederman, Bradford, Brazil, Connett, Dewhurst, Hodgson, Leaver, Roome, and Thomas voted against the motion (Total: 12)

[NOTES:

The Minutes of this meeting and of any Committee referred to above are available on the County Council's Website.

Minutes should be read in association with any Reports or documents referred to therein, for a complete record.

A recording of the webcast of this meeting will also be available to view for up to 12 months from the date of the meeting, at <http://www.devoncc.public-tv/core/portal/home>

The Meeting started at 10.00 am and finished at 12.30 pm