

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Thursday 21 March 2024

Present:-

The Right Worshipful the Lord Mayor Councillor Kevin Mitchell (Lord Mayor)

Councillors Allcock, Asvachin, Begley, Bennett, Bialyk, Branston, Denning, Ellis-Jones, Foale, Fullam, Hannaford, Holland, Jobson, Ketchin, Knott, Leadbetter, Miller, Mitchell, M, Moore, D, Patrick, Pearce, Read, Rees, Sheridan, Snow, Sparling, Vizard, Wardle, Warwick, Williams, M, Williams, R, Wood and Wright

Also Present:-

Chief Executive, Director Corporate Services, Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management, Service Lead Legal Services, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, Finance Manager - General Fund Services, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer (PMD)

5

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Harvey and R. Williams.

6

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED DEVON AND TORBAY DEVOLUTION DEAL

The Leader presented the report on the Council's response to the proposed Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal published by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC) and made the following points:-

- the discussion around devolution had been going on for years;
- the recommendation was to note the consultation;
- the legislation was clear that district councils could not be constituent members of a CCA;
- from a political point of view, some devolved powers would be handed back to local areas regardless of who won the next General Election;
- in the event of a Labour victory at the General Election, a bespoke deal would be proposed to Exeter and Devon rather than the imposition of a Mayor;
- the House of Lords had proposed amendments giving district councils voting rights within the CCA, but these were voted down by the Government;
- £8 would be put aside towards the housing strategy;
- on the issue of transport – of the utmost importance in Exeter-, it was disappointing that Plymouth City Council had opted not to be part of the CCA;
- the deal presented was inevitable;
- even without voting rights, the district councils would have a say in the CCA; and
- Exeter City Council could have opted to take no part in any of the CCA's structures, but it was essential that Exeter's arguments could be put forward.

The Leader further advised that he had held constructive conversations with the other group leaders about the issue of the Business Advisory Committee, and it had been agreed that, in its report, the Council would be seeking to ensure that said committee, as well as a for-profit business representative, also featured:-

- a not-for-profit business representative (i.e. social enterprise); and
- a voluntary and community sector representative.

Councillor M Mitchell, as co-Leader of the Progressive Group, was in agreement with the Leader but felt that:-

- the transfer of certain powers from a lesser to a greater authority was contrary to the very idea of devolution;
- decisions would be made that weren't Exeter City Council's priorities;
- Exeter would essentially be a silent bystander to a higher-tier authority arrangement;
- the money spent on setting up the CCA deal could have been put to better use;
- each district Council within Devon had different needs and different demands; and
- Exeter City Council must ensure that the CCA deal did not constitute the first step towards the creation of a unitary authority for Devon.

Councillor Moore, as co-Leader of the Progressive Group, made the following points:-

- the CCA deal was a foregone conclusion;
- Exeter City Council would inevitably be affected by the deal;
- transport was indeed a priority for Exeter;
- it was reassuring that the Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal appended to the report made reference to the environment and surprising that it used the term "climate emergency"; and
- she welcomed the Leader's decision to take on board her suggested amendments to the report but stressed the importance of ensuring that ECC's representatives on the advisory boards scrutinised the CCA.

During debate, Members made the following comments:-

- Devon was too complex and diverse to fall under a single unitary authority;
- the district council model worked for Exeter;
- the emphasis on housing was welcome, although the upper tier authorities needed to buy into the housing agenda;
- the real issue was about resources;
- the proposed deal was both uninspiring and undemocratic;
- it was puzzling that, with similar-sized populations, Torbay had voting rights in the CCA while Exeter did not;
- the LEP had failed and would be replaced by another failing body; and
- there was a lack of accountability in the proposed governance of the CCA, as attested by the fact that there would be no direct election for seats on the CCA itself.

Councillor Wright, in seconding the recommendation, thanked the Leader for his work on this matter and, while she regretted the money already spent on setting up the CCA deal, she welcomed the fact that group leaders had come together to finesse the report, adding that, if the CCA deal did go ahead, Exeter City Council would more than ever need to speak as one voice.

In concluding, the Leader thanked Members for their contributions to the debate and re-affirmed many of the points made. He made the following further comments:-

- he had been trying to build consensus with the Council's group leaders as well as with the other district councils;
- the Devolution deal needed to focus more on the needs of local residents;

- there would be a democratic deficit if either coastal, rural or urban areas were not adequately represented;
- the deal did not constitute a Local Government reorganisation;
- Exeter has strong convening role to play, specifically by using 'soft' powers of persuasion, for example for better bus services;
- people in Exeter looked to the City Council before the County Council;
- preserving the independence of Exeter City Council was paramount; and
- Exeter City Council would use its influence to hold the CCA to account.

The Leader moved and Councillor Wright seconded the recommendation and following a vote, the recommendation was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED that Council note the proposed Devon and Torbay devolution deal and formation of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and submits the response to the consultation as outlined in the report.

7

ALLOCATION OF CAPITAL FUNDING FOR THE MRF

The Leader presented the report which sought approval for the allocation of £6 million funding from CIL to enable the MRF capital project to proceed, remarking how:-

- important and urgent this investment was to Exeter, which explained why it could not be pushed back until after May;
- the MRF needed increased capacity;
- dedicated food waste bays were needed in order to increase food waste collection;
- a contractor would be found if the recommendation was approved;
- investing in the MRF would make a difference to the recycling rate of the city;
- funding would come mostly through Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) receipts; and
- as well as food collection, this project would ensure that the MRF would run effectively for the next 10 to 15 years and modernise the operation.

Councillor M Mitchell, as co-Leader of the Progressive Group, offered full support for the proposal but remarked that:-

- he would like household glass collection to be added to the collection remit; and
- the basis for the proposal came from the alternative budget put forward by the Progressive Group in February and which had been voted down by the Leader's group.

Councillor Moore, as co-Leader of the Progressive Group, welcomed the report and highlighted how the MRF was a critical piece of infrastructure. She further made the following points:-

- she made reference to a video produced by the Portfolio Holder for Place & City Management which challenged residents to help the Council further reduce waste levels;
- Exeter was third in the country in terms of the lowest levels of waste produced by a city;

- once residents had produced their waste, however small, it became the responsibility of the Council to dispose of it appropriately; and
- the current recycling rate of 25% was insufficient and needed to be raised to at least 65%.

During debate, Members made the following further comments:-

- the lower the amount of waste produced, the more challenging it was to increase recycling in terms of percentage;
- Exeter's MRF was among the first in the country to deal with flexible plastic;
- the MRF was overdue for renewal;
- the current team worked wonders with old equipment;
- a recycling rate of 96% would be achievable with the new equipment;
- it was unclear why CIL money was being spent on cycle routes when Exeter City Council was not a highways authority;
- too much CIL money had been spent on the St Sidwell's Point leisure centre to the detriment of other wards;
- household glass recycling was urgently required;
- the low level of waste in Exeter was the result of the low level of garden waste produced, which should not be celebrated as it demonstrated a lack of gardens in the city; and
- investing in the MRF now would cost the council less in the long term.

In summing up, the Leader addressed Members' comments as follows:-

- "Future Investment in the MRF" had been discussed as a Part II item at the Full Council meeting of 12 December 2023, during which he had encouraged Members of all parties to contact him on the matter;
- on the issue of glass collection, he would ask the Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management to provide a detailed response, which would be forwarded to all Members;
- the continued success and popularity of St Sidwell's Point had vindicated the investment;
- there was a precedent for undelivered promises made to Exeter by the highways authority;
- the reason why many other district Councils had better recycling rates was precisely because they produced more garden waste;
- food waste was a concern but not the only one;
- it was essential for the city to be non-partisan on this matter.

The Leader moved and Councillor Wright seconded the recommendation and following a vote, the recommendation was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED the allocation of £6 million from the CIL infrastructure fund be approved to enable the project approved in December 2023 to proceed.

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

It was noted that no public questions had been received.

9

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL UNDER STANDING ORDER
NO. 8**

It was noted that no questions had been received from Members.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 7.09 pm)

Chair