

STRATEGIC SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: Monday 3 November 2025

Time: 5.30 pm

Venue: Rennes Room, Civic Centre, Paris Street, Exeter

Members are invited to attend the above meeting.

If you have an enquiry regarding any items on this agenda, please contact Liz Smith, Democratic Services Officer (Committees) on 01392 265425.

Entry to the Civic Centre can be gained through the rear entrance, located at the back of the Customer Service Centre, Paris Street.

Membership -

Pole (Chair), Mitchell, K (Deputy Chair), Atkinson, Haigh, Harding, Miller-Boam, Moore, Rolstone, Wetenhall and Williams, M

Agenda

4 Local Government Reorganisation

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To consider the report of the Chief Executive.

Date of Next Meeting

The next scheduled meeting of the Strategic Scrutiny Committee will be held on **Thursday 20 November 2025** at 5.30 pm in the Civic Centre.

Individual reports on this agenda can be produced in large print on request to Democratic Services (Committees) on 01392 265425.

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Local Government Reorganisation

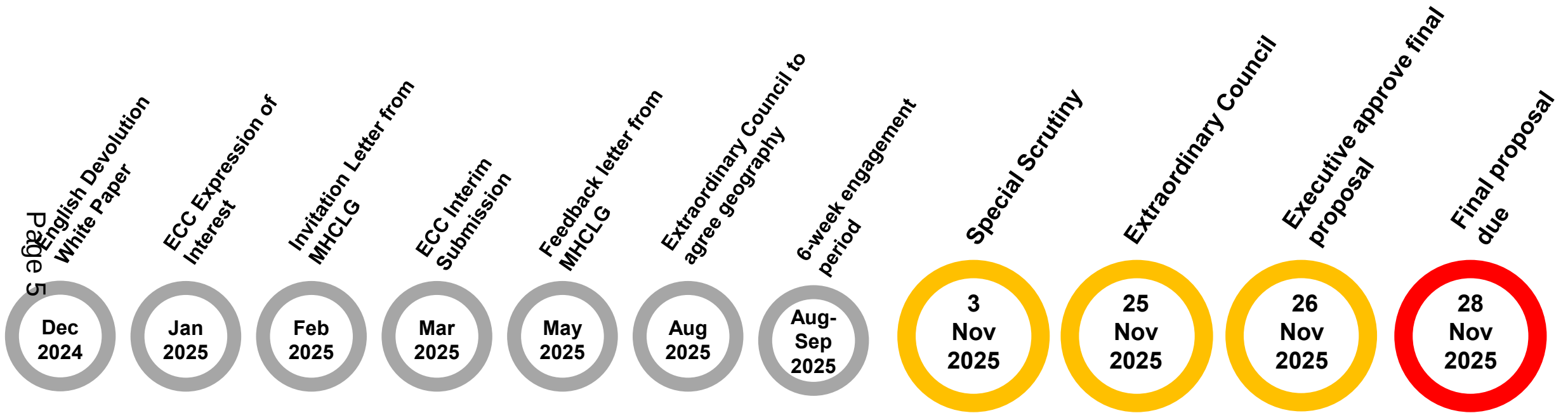
Special Scrutiny
Monday, 3rd November 2025

Bindu Arjoon, Chief Executive

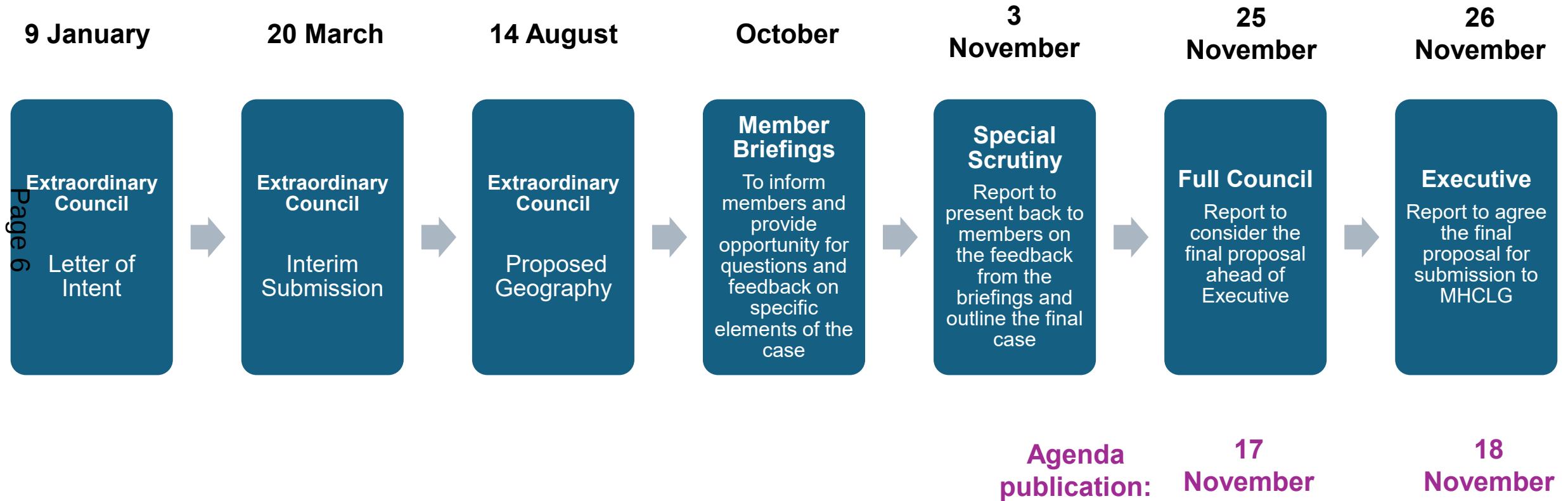
Purpose of this presentation

- To update on the work being undertaken to develop a final proposal for LGR
- Reflect on what members have input during the five member briefings and explain how feedback is being considered
- Share how feedback from other stakeholders including Exeter Partnership, Town and Parish Councils, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Local Government Boundary Commission England (LGBCE) is also being considered
- Provide an outline of the final proposal and how it responds to the six government criteria and the six Exeter principles.

Timeline set by MHCLG



Decision-making process



Government's Six Criteria

A single tier of local government.

Right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks

High quality and sustainable public services to citizens.

Demonstrate how councils in the area have tried to work together

Support devolution arrangements.

Stronger community engagement and genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

Our Six principles

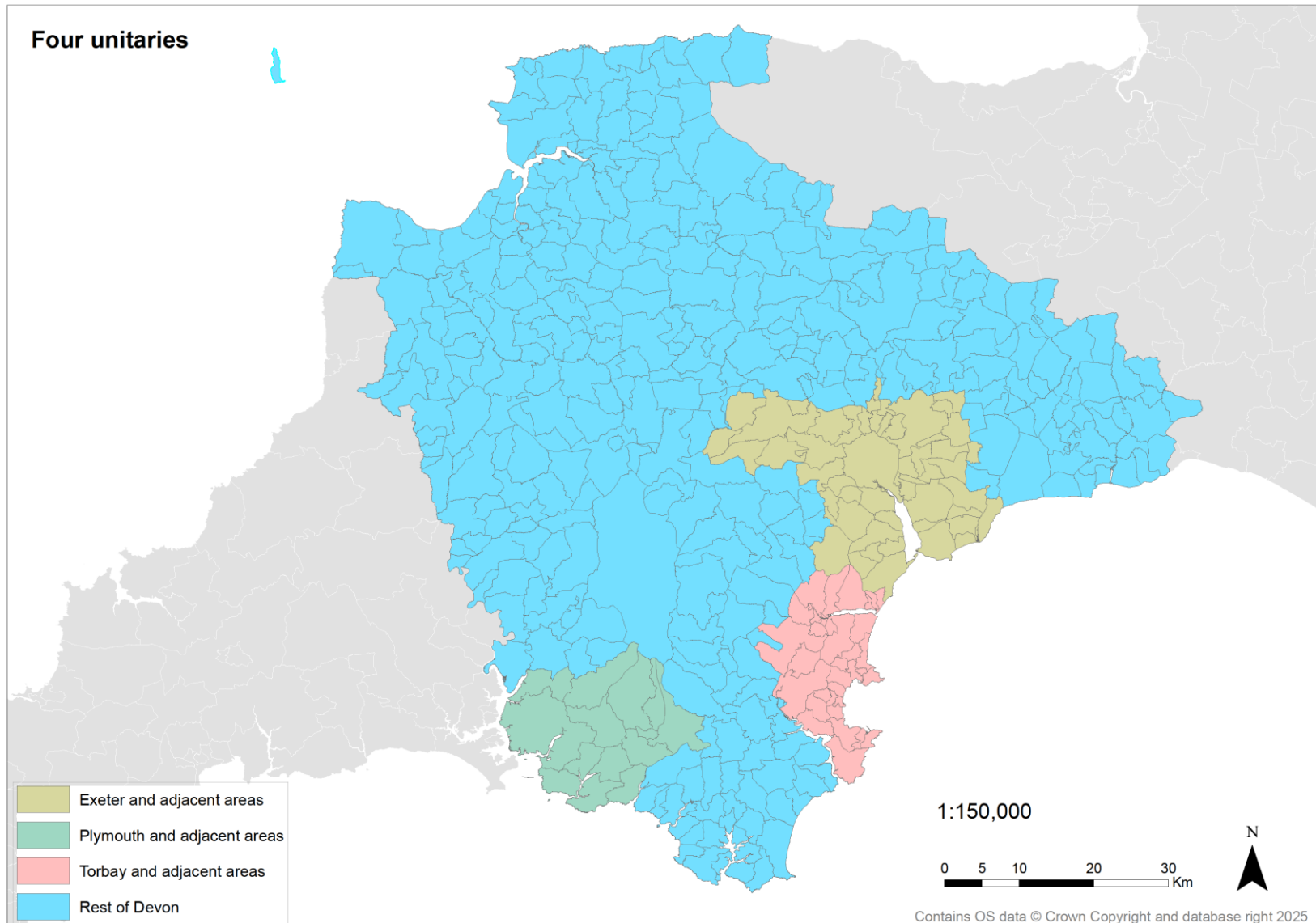
1. Growth, housing, transport, and connectivity
2. Urban and rural issues – addressing inequality and local needs
3. Accessibility to public services
4. Sense of place and community
5. Balanced population size and demographics
6. Financial viability and value for taxpayers

Proposal outline

Proposed Four Unitary Model

1. Exeter and adjacent areas
pop: 256,422
2. Plymouth and adjacent areas
pop: 300,727
3. Torbay and adjacent areas
pop: 220,205
4. Rural Devon Authority
pop: 455,226

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Rationale for the four unitary proposal

- Three urban unitaries empowered to lead on urban priorities and drive growth for the region
- Fourth coastal and country authority able to focus on the distinct needs of dispersed coast or market towns and villages
- Creates four financially viable unitary councils with fair and balanced tax bases
- Coherent geographies with balanced populations
- Reflects the rural-coastal and urban characteristics of Devon, its topography and ways of life
- Aligns with functional housing and economic areas to drive growth for the whole region
- Supports devolution and links to a South-West Peninsula Strategic Mayoral Authority
- Addresses inequality and local needs and delivers accessible high-quality services

Economic Growth

- Joined-up business support, planning and infrastructure
- Single point of contact for advice and growth services
- Stronger leadership so Devon speaks with one voice
- Geography reflects economic and commuter links
- Streamlined services with savings reinvested locally (skills, transport, housing)
- Exeter strengthened as regional driver while supporting rural and coastal needs.

Community Engagement

Delivered a comprehensive engagement process including:

- 1,100 people participated in formal market research surveys: 956 people completed on-line survey
- 1,800 views on dedicated webpage: 65,000+ homes and businesses reached via leaflets and Citizen articles
- 60+ business leaders & Public Sector Leaders attending meetings
- 49 Parish Councils represented at webinars
- 134,884 social media reach

Results confirms the approach officers are taking to public service reform and neighbourhood empowerment models are on the right track

Residents have told us:

- They want decisions about their place to be made locally
- They value information about and early engagement in decision making
- They value having a supportive and accessible local ward councillor.

Neighbourhood Empowerment

- English Devolution Bill introduces new duties for councils to create Neighbourhood Area Forums: awaiting government regulations for the details
- Working to establish councillor numbers for each of the councils in our Proposal
- Need to address issue that Exeter does not have Parish Councils
- Community Governance Review recommended.

Financial Sustainability

- Financial model is viable across Devon
- Proposal delivers significant payback across the Councils.

High–Quality Sustainable Public Services

- Our proposal will deliver high-quality, innovative, and sustainable public services tailored to local needs
- There are significant challenges within Adult, Children's, SEND, Transport, Waste and Planning Services
- Our proposal provides opportunity to redesign joined up services built around the needs of people that are simple and easy to access.
- Early financial and performance analysis shows opportunities for efficiencies
- Promoting sustainability with new delivery models that can better meet local needs and demand.

What we have heard from you

Member Briefings

Members have shared their views and provided feedback to the officers developing the final proposal through:

- A series of All Member Briefings during October to keep members informed about the developing of our case
- Five sessions focussed on specific topic areas, based around the six criteria from Government:
 - Growth and devolution
 - Community engagement
 - High quality services
 - Neighbourhood empowerment, governance and council size
 - Financial sustainability
- All Member briefings held on 26th June and 5th August
- Group Leaders' workshop on council size 28th October

What we heard	How this will be included
Neighbourhood Committees (NACs) and considerations of size, powers, scrutiny.	A vision and principles for empowering neighbourhood communities. The design of Neighbourhood Forums will depend on regulations awaited from Government
Desire for a Community Governance Review and how to address the unparished area of Exeter.	Recommending a Community Governance Review.
Need to highlight local views arising from our robust public engagement strategy which included a representative survey and bespoke questions.	Description of the stakeholder engagement undertaken and the insights this has provided.
Reflect the urban and rural-coastal character of the region and avoid the “one big Devon” narrative.	Proposal will highlight the unique characteristics of Devon, acknowledging the role of key urban centres as drivers of economic growth whilst respecting the different needs of coastal, rural and market towns.
Importance of presenting solutions for the whole of Devon and not just focus on an urban unitary for Exeter.	This is part of the criteria. The final proposal will provide a solution for the whole county and highlight how this also supports Devolution arrangements.

What we heard	How this will be included
Consider working with NHS stakeholders to understand alignment with locality-based NHS boundaries and the Better Care Fund.	Further engagement with NHS and opportunities to reshape services based on community needs rather than legacy structures will be included in transition and implementation planning.
Address recruitment and retention of staff in social care, especially frontline staff	Workforce challenges addressed at high level in the proposal, stressing the importance of valuing existing staff, developing a strong culture, and learning from other authorities including . building a strong culture for the new authorities. Further engagement with stakeholders will be included in transition and implementation planning.
How do we deliver services differently and capture opportunities to work with HE/FE sectors to provide training in social care locally.	Further engagement with stakeholders will be included in transition and implementation planning.
Potential for future collaborative service delivery.	Further engagement with stakeholders will be included in transition and implementation planning.
Suggest co-design approach with schools, trust, parent groups regarding SEND services.	Further engagement with stakeholders will be included in transition and implementation planning.

What we heard	How this will be included
Importance of engaging with under 18's and hearing the youth voice	Further engagement with stakeholders, including organisations working with children and young people, will be included in transition and implementation planning.
Desire to reflect the importance of natural assets and landscape and protecting the environment and future health of rivers.	Proposal addresses how new unitaries might protect the natural assets and landscape including environmental protection and health of rivers.
Ensuring climate change, decarbonisation and adaption is factored in to plans.	Environmental stewardship and statutory obligations embedded in the principles, with opportunities highlighted for strategic planning on nature recovery and net zero.
Consideration to subsidised public transport for rural areas.	Could be considered by the Shadow Authority as part of the budget setting process
Consideration for managing debt	Debt repayment figures are built into the viability model.
Number of councillors to achieve strong representation and manageable caseloads	Group Leaders have given officers some recommendations about councillor numbers which will be included in the final proposal.

Member focussed work: proposed councillor numbers

- Members were keen to consider councillor size and have had the opportunity to work through the options and discuss:
 - the number of councillors for each of the unitary councils we are proposing
 - councillor to elector ratios
 - balancing member caseload and differing community needs
 - committee places and responsibilities of a unitary council

Group Leaders met on 28th October to agree an approach using data provided by officers alongside guidance from MHCLG and LGBCE.

Member focussed work: proposed councillor numbers

Unitary	Number of councillors
Exeter Unitary	72
Plymouth Unitary	60-72
Torbay Unitary	40-47
Rural-Coastal Unitary	70-100

Rationale:

- Addresses the criteria and guidance from MHCLG and LGBCE and the importance of getting it right first time
- Ensures good representation and responds to a clear call from communities through the engagement process for “supportive and accessible local ward councillors”
- Ensures councillor caseloads are manageable, any reduction in numbers would increase the work
- Ensures manageable committee workloads, also giving consideration for councillors taking on new statutory duties and work currently dealt with by upper-tier councils
- Maintains a good balance of councillors in both urban and rural areas underpinned by deep local understanding of “the patch”, the neighbourhoods and the communities
- Addresses the larger electorate in the Rural-Coastal unitary

Other feedback

- Feedback and advice from MHCLG and LGBCE
- Seminars with District Councils Network (DCN) and the Local Government Association (LGA)
- Input from All Member briefings, Full Council and Group Leaders' meetings
- Devon Districts Forum
- Devon Council Leaders and Chief Executives
- 121's with Leaders and Chief Executives from other Devon authorities
- Briefings with local MPs
- Webinars with Towns and Parishes
- Six week stakeholder engagement programme

How the proposal is evolving

- **Proposal structure:** to ensure we submit a legally compliant proposal we will put forward a base case using existing district boundaries as the building blocks then request a modification on the expanded boundaries with a supporting rationale
- **Population Size:** while 500k remains a guiding principle, government language has softened, and our proposal will justify deviations based on local needs, housing growth, and devolution ambitions.
- **Options appraisals** now being developed against criteria and principles
- **City Status** request to protect the current city status and preserve the Lord Mayoralty, which is a key symbol of civic identity and heritage
- **Community Governance Review recommended** to bring about improved community engagement, more cohesive communities, better local democracy and result in more effective and convenient delivery of local services.

Questions?