

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Thursday 9 January 2025

Present:-

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

Councillors Allcock, Asvachin, Banyard, Begley, Bialyk, Darling, Ellis-Jones, Foale, Fullam, Haigh, Harding, Holland, Hughes, Hussain, Jobson, Knott, Miller-Boam, Mitchell, M, Moore, Palmer, Parkhouse, Patrick, Pole, Read, Rees, Rolstone, Sheridan, Snow, Vizard, Wardle, Wetenhall, Williams, M, Williams, R, Wood and Wright

Apologies:-

Councillors Atkinson, Bennett and Ketchin

Also Present

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer (PMD)

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ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE LORD MAYOR

The Lord Mayor welcomed Councillors, officers and members of the press and public. He made the following statement:-

“The report for this meeting has been published at short notice and has not been open for inspection by members of the public for at least five clear days before this meeting.

In my opinion as Lord Mayor, there are special circumstances as to why the item should be considered at this meeting as a matter of urgency.

The government originally intended to publish the English Devolution White Paper in November 2024; however, it was not published until 16 December 2024.

In the letter addressed to all two-tier councils and neighbouring unitary authorities dated 16th December 2024, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, in referring to the English Devolution White Paper and the government’s manifesto pledge to transfer power out of Westminster through devolution and to fix the foundations of local government’ set out the proposal to postpone the local government elections scheduled for May 2025, - in order to help to manage the demands imposed on those authorities keen to proceed with devolution.

More recently, in their report dated 8 January 2025, Devon County Council have requested that the County Council elections scheduled for May 2025 be postponed.

On this basis I consider that there are special circumstances, which are: that the deadline imposed by the Minister of State of Friday 10th January 2025

means that these issues need to be considered and determined by this Council as a matter of urgency relating to whether submissions should be made to the Minister of State expressing this Council's intentions as set out in the report before us.

If this council's intentions are not submitted to the Minister of State by Friday 10th January 2025, then its proposals could be compromised."

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were advised that Councillor Asvachin – who was both a Devon County Councillor and Exeter City Councillor – had received dispensation from the Monitoring Officer to vote on the item 'Urgent Report on the Council's proposed response to the English Devolution White Paper' (Minute No. 3).

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URGENT REPORT ON THE COUNCIL'S PROPOSED RESPONSE TO THE ENGLISH DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER

The Leader of the Council moved and read out the recommendations set out in the report as follows:-

That Council agrees:

- 1) To support the submission of a Letter of Intent to government by 10 January 2025 which indicates this council's opposition to any future proposal for one unitary council for Devon and expresses Exeter's intention to submit interim plans for unitary status for Exeter once we receive the Invitation from Government.**
- 2) To support work with other neighbouring authorities to bring forward a Mayoral Strategic Authority which may cover the areas of Devon and Cornwall with a unitary Exeter as a constituent member.**

That Council notes:

- 3) That the geography of the proposed unitary council for Exeter will be set out in the interim plan to be submitted to government in March 2025, after due consideration and agreement by Council.**
- 4) That the Leader of the Council will work collaboratively with the Leaders of the other political groups on the Council as plans develop, ahead of proposals being brought formally to members. This Council will also work collaboratively, as much as is possible, with other local councils on the development of proposals going forward in the interest of Exeter and Devon as whole.**

Councillor Wright seconded the recommendations.

The Chief Executive introduced the report, highlighting:-

- the English Devolution White Paper published by the Government on 16 December 2024;
- the four areas addressed in the document; and
- how, for the purpose of the present meeting, Members would be focusing on Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

She explained the three different types of Strategic Authorities introduced within the new framework, namely:-

1. Foundation Strategic Authorities;
2. Mayoral Strategic Authorities; and
3. Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

She then provided further detail into the White Paper and next steps:-

- the White Paper restated Government's ambition that all areas of the country would ultimately have a Mayoral Strategic Authority;
- in two-tier areas, the Government would only establish County Combined Authorities (CCAs) for an interim period;
- the Secretary of State would be given the power to create a Strategic Authority by ministerial directive where local consensus could not be achieved;
- all councils in the 21 two-tier areas would be expected to reorganise over the current Parliament and into the next;
- the Government intended for reorganisation to happen in a phased approach, with the first new unitary councils expected before the end of the current Parliament;
- the Government had set an expectation that new unitary councils should be based on a population size of at least 500,000 but had indicated it would consider smaller unitary councils on an exceptional basis;
- the Government had indicated that it would prioritise areas for reorganisation where this reorganisation could unlock devolution or deepen the existing devolution arrangements;
- the Minister was expected to formally invite unitary proposals later in January 2025, asking for interim plans to be submitted in March 2025;
- the timescale for the submission for final bids was expected to be set out in the invitation as well as final confirmation of the timescale for new unitary councils to come into being;
- in recognising, for some areas, the timing of elections would affect their planning for devolution, the Government was minded to lay secondary legislation to postpone local council elections from May 2025 to May 2026. This would only happen where it is demonstrated that it would help an area to deliver both reorganisation and devolution within the most ambitious timeframe;
- the Minister had asked upper tier councils to submit their request to postpone elections on or before Friday 10 January 2025;
- until the announcement of the White Paper, Exeter City Council had been working with Devon County Council and the other Devon District Councils to support work to create a Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority;
- following the publication of the White Paper, Devon County Council had decided that they intended to apply to the government to postpone their elections due in May or order to develop plans for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation;
- the proposal before Members was to agree that Exeter was committed to ensuring that any proposals to reorganise local government and devolve powers to local areas were done to service the interests of the people and the city of Exeter and the wider Devon area. Exeter City Council would also work collaboratively with its communities and key stakeholders in the city as well as with the other local Devon councils to develop proposals that reflect a positive outcome for the city and the county as whole;
- local discussions about the creation of a unitary Devon authority had taken place; however, it was recommended that the Council indicate that Members did not believe that a single unitary council covering the current Devon County Council administrative boundary would provide the best outcomes for the people and the city of Exeter or the wider region, believing that, as much as possible, local decisions should be made locally;
- it was proposed that, when the Government invites unitary proposals later in January, Exeter City Council submits plans for a unitary Exeter Council, arguing

that unitary status would enable Exeter to better co-ordinate public service delivery, drive regeneration and economic growth and strengthen community leadership and identity;

- although the criteria from government against which bids for unitary status would be assessed was yet to be announced, Members recalled that proposals for a unitary council for Exeter were agreed by the Government of the time, in 2010, with a Statutory Instrument laid in Parliament for the creation of the unitary council for Exeter, only to be subsequently repealed by the new Coalition Government of 2010;
- subject to the agreement of Members, the Council would send a letter of intent to the Government expressing its intention to submit plans for a Unitary Exeter within a potential Devon and Cornwall Mayoral Strategic Authority;
- as part of this process, there would be opportunities for the Council to proactively engage with neighbouring authorities and the County Council, to demonstrate a joined-up strategy to articulate the clear benefits of working together as a cohesive area to address strategic opportunities and challenges; and
- the letter of intent would set out the Council's significant achievements to date and the opportunities provided by unitary status for enhancing the city's status as a regional economic driver that would drive the Industrial Strategy in Devon to both generate growth and more effectively connect with citizens and communities.

In proposing the recommendations, Councillor Bialyk made the following statement:-

“Our achievements as a district council have been substantial; as a unitary council, we could further enhance the city's status as a regional economic driver, adopting new governance arrangements which reflect the vitality and ambition of the city and its partners.

As one of the fastest growing cities in the UK, we have seen an 8% growth in new businesses with 5,147 registered for business rates; a 3% growth in jobs; 10% growth in population. In terms of economic productivity, despite its challenges, the Exeter Gross Value Add (GVA) is £5.2bn.

Exeter has an estimated population of 130,800 and is at the heart of a travel to work area of over 499,800 residents with around 35,000 people commuting into Exeter on a daily basis.

Exeter has an international airport, two railway routes into London (Paddington and Waterloo), major routes by road (M5 to Bristol), three park and ride schemes and joined up cycle routes within the city.

Exeter and Cranbrook are one of only 12 places in England to be awarded Pilot status by Sport England to tackle inactivity in communities and to trail blaze new ways of getting people active for life. Following the original Sport England award of £4.721m in June 2019 a further £1.883m was awarded to continue delivery of the programme in line with the Sport England strategy ‘Uniting the Movement’ to March 2025. Due to the success of the programme and the clear evidence to demonstrate the positive impact that this work has had on communities, Sport England has confirmed that they will continue to support the work for a further three years from 2025.

As a council, we have a track record as a willing and supportive partner in the city, the county and the wider South West. Prior to Covid-19 Exeter was

performing well, relative to many other cities in the UK, against several indicators such as employment rates, job vacancies, GDP per worker, and patent applications. There is also emerging evidence that the city has so far proved to be one of the most resilient parts of the country in responding to the economic shock that has followed the pandemic. Among UK cities only York has a lower unemployment claimant count.

The city is also an important retail location, serving a catchment area that extends well beyond the City's boundaries. These factors, and relatively good transport links, mean that Exeter attracts large numbers of daily commuters, who contribute to the City's particularly high employment density. Exeter is vital to the South West peninsula: it has economic assets and strengths which can be built on and which can have higher, multiplier effects.

In addition, many places in the county have fallen further behind, with geographical inequalities within the region and in relation to other parts of the UK. Exeter's economic growth must, therefore, play an important role, if any genuine prospect of success is to be achieved. There is strong evidence that improved connectivity between different places rather than the absolute size of individual entities, is the critical factor in providing the conditions for productivity and 'polycentric' growth and this will require a different subregional approach to achieve economic integration.

We think the importance of Exeter presents the basis for a strong case for a new Unitary Authority for Exeter, within the context of devolution to a new Strategic Authority for Devon and Cornwall & Isles of Scilly. Working with communities, businesses, the education sector, regional partners and Government, a Unitary Authority for Exeter will co-create and co-shape a new economic landscape: one that can drive industrial strategy in Devon and the wider South West to both generate growth and more effectively connect with citizens and communities, mobilising social and behavioural change.

Inclusive growth, to eradicate large inequality gaps in the City and across the County, will be the priority. By expanding employment prospects, raising incomes and improving housing Exeter can address the wider determinants of health to enable more residents to live longer in good health. This will be vital to reducing levels of dependency on public expenditure, allowing the County to be self-sustaining. A Unitary Authority Exeter's goals will be to create:

- A thriving new economy at the heart of the South West peninsula that can grow and sustain financially secure employment and offer opportunities to all.
- A vibrant city-region extending opportunities to surrounding towns and villages, with a range of good quality housing and amenities, where people and families want to live, learn and work.
- A place where businesses would choose to locate.
- A place where people and communities are supported to enjoy more productive, healthier and happier lives.
- A place where people want to live, work, visit, shop, and study.
- A place that delivers productive, digitally enabled, customer centric public services.

Taking into consideration our strong track record and our ambitions for the future, we firmly believe that we have a strong evidence base to support a bid for unitary status.

This letter of intent has the support of all members of the council, signifying the commitment of all political groups and councillors to the development of a unitary council for Exeter, to enable us to further unlock economic growth for the city and wider area and deliver better outcomes for our residents, businesses, communities and partners, both in Devon and Exeter.”

During the debate, Opposition Group Leaders made the following comments:-

Councillor Moore:-

- called for a thoughtful case to be made for a unitary Exeter;
- remarked that the two-tier system “would not be mourned”;
- welcomed the opportunity for Exeter to host all services under one roof;
- expressed the view that services and democracy ought to be redesigned and rooted in meeting the needs of Exeter’s local communities and the environment;
- highlighted the need for Parish Councils;
- warned of the danger of chasing GDP at all costs;
- felt that funding must improve, remarking that cuts would be considered at the next meeting of Full Council; and
- reminded Members of the Council’s core mission to deliver services.

She asked the following questions to the Leader:-

1. how did he intend to involve Councillors and also properly engage Exeter’s communities in this process?
2. did he agree that the democratic process we had was important - and May’s elections should not be cancelled? and
3. would an interim report be presented to Full Council in February before any proposals were finalised or submitted to Government?

She made the following closing comments:-

- the new regional bodies proposed by the Government offered an opportunity to introduce proportional voting;
- while the city was wealthy, the future was bleak for its communities; and
- communities and the environment must be at the heart of the Exeter City Council’s next steps.

Councillor M Mitchell:-

- remarked that the White Paper, which had not been mentioned in the Labour party’s election manifesto, was a clear indication for the direction and speed at which the Government wished to proceed;
- favoured unitary authorities as they provided a one-stop shop for residents regarding most local services;
- expressed severe reservations about directly elected Mayors, especially for mixed urban and rural areas where a potential Devon and Cornwall Strategic Mayoral Authority, if measured from its eastern border, would almost stretch to outer London;
- felt that the White Paper was about upward centralisation;
- thanked the Chief Executive for working on this urgent matter during the Christmas recess and the Leader for involving other party leaders;
- felt that this meeting would enable Exeter to put a marker down stating that Exeter should be the focal point for a new unitary authority;
- voiced concern that this was a highly disturbing time for Exeter City Council’s employees;

- stressed the importance of consulting as widely as possible;
- reminded Members that Devon Districts were unanimous in their opposition to a unitary council for Devon;
- noted that Devon County Council, appeared to suggest that they knew better than the District Councils, had cancelled the Team Devon meeting scheduled for earlier in the week;
- made reference to the Radcliffe-Maud report of 1968 and the introduction of the two-tier system by the Heath government in 1970;
- remarked that, unless local authorities in Devon worked together, the Government would impose a solution on the county;
- expressed concern about the size of a unitary authority for Exeter being either too large or too small;
- reminisced about his journey as a Councillor in Devon; and
- repeated calls for talks and discussions with neighbouring authorities.

Councillor Jobson:-

- reminded Members that the Conservative Group had supported Exeter City Council's (ECC) bid for unitary status in 2010;
- considered it unfortunate that the current Government seemed to be dictating terms to local authorities;
- stressed how local government must remain responsive to the needs of local taxpayers and retain control of local planning decisions;
- felt that it was difficult to see how Neighbourhood Plans would survive with any meaning or at all against such an upheaval of power;
- expressed bemusement that, for such a huge change, an incredibly short timescale was being put forward by Government and warned of the risk of ECC being bullied into a forced local government restructure;
- felt that any changes should not only take into account the historic role that Exeter had played in Devon and the wider region, but the future of the City which would involve greater joint working and stronger local accountability; and
- was clear that local government should be 'local' to residents and respect proud local identities.

Members made the following further comments:-

Councillor Vizard:-

- highlighted the impact of reorganisation on Council staff;
- supported the Government's ambition on devolution;
- saw unitary status as an opportunity for Exeter to take control of its own destiny;
- made reference to frustrations of the two-tier structure; and
- welcomed the opportunity to see highways, public transport and net zero brought together under one roof alongside ECC's existing remit.

Councillor M Williams:-

- remarked that Exeter had come a long way since the nineties;
- welcomed the ambition of the Government's scheme;
- felt that unitary status would enable ECC to directly help people;
- made reference to Greater Manchester's Bee Network public transport system;
- felt that both strategic planning and better scrutiny would be facilitated by unitary status; and
- agreed with Plymouth City Council that a having Strategic Mayoral Authority would drive economic growth in the South West.

Councillor Knott:-

- informed Members that he received daily emails from members of the public who did not understand the two-tier system;
- warned that there would be financial implications to any local government reorganisation; and
- reminded Members that prospective geographical boundaries were not a matter for discussion at the present meeting.

Councillor Rees:-

- supported a joined-up approach;
- remarked on the vast number of issues that local authorities in Devon would not be able to address unless they worked together; and
- called for a holistic approach to the process, stressing that nothing ECC undertook must come at the expense of other areas.

Councillor Wood:-

- remarked that, he had been informed at various national conferences that, people assumed that Exeter was already a unitary authority;
- made reference to new developments in and around Pinhoe and to emails he received from residents living in an area outside his remit;
- noted that the city limits were established a long time ago; and
- felt that there was great value in bringing in communities who were currently outside Exeter yet looking to the city.

Councillor Palmer:-

- spoke from the point of view of a relative newcomer to the city;
- felt that this was a political issue, adding that devolution was key to Liberal Democrat principles;
- criticised the timing of the white paper and the fact that it was being forced on local authorities;
- warned of the complaints that a unitary council's additional responsibilities would bring;
- felt that the Government gave the impression that it did not listen and was effectively committing a power grab;
- strongly opposed the Strategic Mayoral authority model; and
- warned Members not to underestimate the costs involved.

Councillor Parkhouse:-

- saw the opportunity to strengthen governance in the proposals;
- felt that the urgency of this matter could not be overstated, adding that, while the process felt rushed, it would be managed over two parliaments; and
- thanked everyone who worked on this over the Christmas period.

Councillor Holland:-

- spoke of Exeter as the "jewel in the crown" of Devon and the gateway to the South West of England;
- made reference to the Exeter Guildhall being the oldest civic building in England still being used for its initial purpose;
- saw the Lord Mayor as a great ambassador for the city and wanted the Mayoralty to stay; and
- felt that ECC staff needed security.

Councillor Wright:-

- expressed satisfaction at Members' clear passion about Exeter;
- refuted the earlier claim that this was a power grab from the Government; and

- was confident that a way forward would be found thanks to collaborative working.

Councillor Miller-Boam:-

- referred to Exeter as the powerhouse of the region; and
- remarked that change was coming and that this Council would cease to exist in its current form.

Councillor Fullam:-

- stressed the need for Members to work together across party lines;
- made the point that the Minister needed to be aware that there were alternative options in Devon;
- warned of the danger of unitary authorities being overruled by another structure;
- remarked that ECC Councillors connected with residents at a “human” level;
- highlighted the importance of localised decision-making;
- called on the Leader to make use of all his connections;
- voiced concerns that the detail of the present debate would be lost when relayed to the Minister;
- made the case for thinking of Exeter as a “city-state”; and
- voiced support at this stage.

Councillor Read:-

- expressed the view that the two-tier system did not work; and
- called for engagement with stakeholders as part of the consultation process.

Councillor Harding:-

- voiced concern that investment would be more difficult under a unitary Devon Council; and
- felt that a more compact unitary authority would enable people with day jobs to attend Council meetings.

Councillor Wardle:-

- remarked that the status quo was not an option and expressed his support.

Councillor Pole:-

- spoke as a recently elected Member;
- stressed the importance of collegiate working; and
- urged Members to support the recommendations.

Councillor Asvachin:-

- advised that she was the only Member in attendance who was also a Devon County Councillor; and
- spoke of the frustration experienced by members of the public who did not know the difference in remit between Exeter City Council and Devon County Council, resulting in a lack of trust in local politicians.

The Leader of the Council addressed Members’ comments and questions as follows:-

- he would welcome Councillor Fullam’s counsel with regard to next steps;
- Members who had recently moved to Exeter were genuine Exonians;
- he reminisced about when Topsham, Pinhoe and Alphington were outside the city;
- he felt that he had demonstrated his willingness to work collaboratively;

- he reassured Members that Exeter City Council would not be bullied by anyone and that local planning decisions would remain the remit of Exeter Councillors;
- he urged Members not to get political over this issue;
- he advised supporters of proportional representation to speak to MPs from their respective political parties;
- Strategic Mayoral Authorities would not deal with day-to-day issues;
- he confirmed that there would be statutory engagement but that he wanted to go even further;
- the Minister would have to take a view and make a decision about postponing the forthcoming County elections;
- he would trust everyone elected to a future unitary Exeter authority to represent the city within the Strategic Mayoral Authority;
- he wanted it recorded that he would work with Opposition Group Leaders;
- any formal submission of plans for a Unitary Exeter would go to Executive then to Full Council;
- while it was his preferred option to reach an agreement with other Districts, there was a possibility that this would not be possible;
- he agreed that the foundation of the Combined County Authority was flawed;
- in fairness to Torbay Council and Devon County Council, they were approaching the issue in a collegiate manner; and
- he called on all Members to support the recommendations.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Bialyk, seconded by Councillor Wright and, on a RECORDED vote, UNANIMOUSLY CARRIED.

RESOLVED to agree:-

- 1) To support the submission of a Letter of Intent to government by 10 January 2025 which indicates this council's opposition to any future proposal for one unitary council for Devon and expresses Exeter's intention to submit interim plans for unitary status for Exeter once we receive the Invitation from Government.
- 2) To support work with other neighbouring authorities to bring forward a Mayoral Strategic Authority which may cover the areas of Devon and Cornwall with a unitary Exeter as a constituent member.

RESOLVED to note:-

- 3) That the geography of the proposed unitary council for Exeter will be set out in the interim plan to be submitted to government in March 2025, after due consideration and agreement by Council.
- 4) That the Leader of the Council will work collaboratively with the Leaders of the other political groups on the Council as plans develop, ahead of proposals being brought formally to members. This Council will also work collaboratively, as much as is possible, with other local councils on the development of proposals going forward in the interest of Exeter and Devon as whole.

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

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

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 8.08 pm)

Chair