

## **EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL**

Thursday 14 August 2025

### **Present:**

Councillors Asvachin, Banyard, Begley, Bennett, Bialyk, Cookson, Darling, Foale, Haigh, Harding, Hughes, Hussain, Jobson, Knott, Miller-Boam, Mitchell, K, Mitchell, M, Moore, Parkhouse, Patrick, Payne, Pole, Rees, Rolstone, Sheridan, Snow, Wardle, Wetenhall, Williams, M, Williams, R and Wright

### **Also Present:**

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Place, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Democratic Services Officer and Democratic Services Officer

### **Apologies:**

Councillors Atkinson, Fullam, Ketchin, Read, and Vizard.

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### **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were made by Members.

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### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN DEVON: PREFERRED GEOGRAPHY**

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

#### **That Council:**

**2.1 Notes the Governments response (Appendix 2) to Exeter's interim submission;**

**2.2 Agrees the proposed geography for Exeter City Council's local Government Reorganisation proposal for Devon to enable officers to undertake a programme of public and stakeholder engagement to assist in building the detailed proposal to bring forward to Council for approval. The outcomes of the engagement with residents and stakeholders will be shared with Members;**

**2.3 Delegates authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to further develop the proposal; undertake the proposed engagement and prepare the final proposal for agreement prior to submission to Government; and**

**2.4 Notes that a request for any further budget required to complete the final proposal will be brought to council for approval.**

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

*"Thank you, Lord Mayor, and good evening, Members, colleagues, and members of the public who are joining us tonight. Let me begin by saying this plainly: everything is about to change.*

*We are here because we have an opportunity to redraw the map of local government in Devon. Members will know that this council has long held an ambition to be a unitary council for the benefit of the city and the whole county.*

*When we last debated this issue, the council confirmed that ambition.*

*So, the question before us is not if we respond. It is how.*

*And I believe – I genuinely believe – that Exeter has a responsibility to lead. Not dominate. Not dictate. But lead. With clarity, with humility, and with a deep respect for the communities around us.*

### **Overview of the proposal**

*The Chief Executive will take us through the detail, but I wanted to visit some points first. The proposal before us sets out a clear direction of three unitary councils. It is a model that recognises the distinct identities and needs of urban and rural communities – and aligns geography, population, and economic potential with financial sustainability.*

*It rightly places Exeter and Plymouth where they belong – as engines of growth for the whole county. Exeter's strengths in housing, innovation, education, climate science, and transport connectivity make it a natural hub for a new urban authority. This is a rare opportunity to reshape public services – to improve outcomes, tackle inequalities, and deliver better value for money. And by working with places that already have strong ties to Exeter, we can build something that accelerates growth and strengthens communities – not just here, but across Devon.*

*I want to thank the Chief Executive and the officers for the work that has gone into this report. It is substantial, evidence-based, and rooted in a geography that makes sense for Devon's future.*

*To be clear: we are not approving a final blueprint tonight. What we are doing – if we agree – is allowing officers to do the detailed financial assessment and begin formal engagement. To test the thinking. To gather the evidence. To listen.*

*We are also delegating authority to the Chief Executive – working closely with me – to shape the full proposal. That includes financial modelling, service design, and conversations with other councils. I want to assure members that officers will be briefing members as the case develops. If more budget is needed to do this properly, then that decision will come back to members.*

### **Criticisms**

*Now, I have heard the criticisms from some quarters that this is just Exeter trying to expand or a "power grab." Honestly? I get it. People are wary. They have seen too many decisions made without them, not for them. But that is not what this is. That is not what we are doing.*

*We are not asking anyone to sign up to our proposal. We are asking them to talk to us. To challenge us. To tell us what works – and what does not. Because if this new council is going to serve people well, it has to be built with them – not just around them.*

*In the rush to get a soundbite out, some early critics have missed the point entirely: this proposed geography is not about Exeter. It is about Devon. It is about how this county sets itself up for decades to come.*

*We cannot afford to let politics get in the way of a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape a future that delivers growth, fairness, and success for all our communities.*

### **Engagement**

*We have got a very tight window. The Government's timetable is ambitious, but we always describe ourselves as an ambitious council. And yes, the timeframe limits what we can do. But it does not stop us from doing it properly.*

*If members agree tonight, we will begin a six-week programme of public, resident, and stakeholder engagement. That includes webinars, in-person meetings, and direct outreach to every parish and town council within the proposed geography.*

*We will be transparent about our thinking. We will share the proposed boundaries, the rationale, the evidence – and we will ask people what they think. What worries them. What excites them. What they need from a future council.*

*We are already working closely with Plymouth Council on their proposal, which, as I said earlier, recognises their position as an economic powerhouse of the county. We also recognise Torbay's unique role in the region and are committed to working collaboratively to explore how its priorities and proposals can be reflected in any final submission.*

*We are genuinely open to collaborating with any council that wants to be part of this conversation. And as the Chief Executive said in her speech, we are open to making changes to our proposal based on what communities and government are telling us.*

*That is why we are engaging – to listen, to learn, and to adjust, so we end up with the strongest possible plan for Devon.*

### **Closing**

*Back in March, we gave unanimous support to our officers to begin this work. That unity matters. It sends a clear message: Exeter is serious about leading this process with integrity and transparency.*

*I remember one evening during my first campaign – one of those cold, wet nights where you wonder why you are out at all. I knocked on a door in Exwick and spoke to a woman in her seventies. She lived alone, had mobility issues, and relied on a patchwork of services from different councils. She said, "I don't care who runs what – I just want someone to know I exist." That stuck with me.*

*Because behind all the talk about structures and submissions and strategy documents, that is what this is really about – making sure people feel seen. That they matter. That the system works for them, not the other way around.*

*So tonight, I am asking you to support the motion. Not because it is perfect. Not because every detail is nailed down. But because it moves us forward.*

*It lets officers continue the work. It lets us start the conversations that matter.*

*It lets us shape something better for all Devon.*

*Thank you, Lord Mayor."*

The recommendations were seconded by Councillor Laura Wright.

The Chief Executive presented the report, making the following statement:

*"Thank you, Lord Mayor, and good evening, Members.*

*This evening marks a key moment in shaping the future of local government across Devon. The report before members is about designing a unitary authority that reflects the strengths of our county, responds to the needs of our communities, and improves services across Devon.*

*Before addressing the report in detail, I would like to remind members of the context in which this report is set. The Government has made its direction clear. The English Devolution White Paper signalled the end of the current two-tier system of local government. For Devon, that means that all 11 councils will be abolished by 2028.*

*The city council's responsibility is to propose to government what a new single-tier of local government should look like – not just in the interest of the residents of Exeter but for the whole county. This presents an opportunity to reshape services, strengthen identity, and deliver better economic growth for all communities in Devon.*

### **Purpose of the report**

*The report before members this evening does not set out the full case for the Council's proposal for local government reorganisation. Its purpose is to confirm the proposed geography that will underpin our submission and Members' decision tonight will mean officers can begin developing the full proposal, including a detailed financial assessment.*

*That final submission will make the case not only for a council to serve Exeter and the surrounding area, but also for councils to administer the rest of Devon. Agreeing the geography this evening allows the council to begin our planned programme of public and stakeholder engagement over the next six weeks. The outcome of that engagement will be shared with members and used to shape the final submission to Government on 28 November.*

### **Proposed geography**

*Lord Mayor, the proposed geography reflects the natural connections our communities have in Devon – the places where people live, work, study and access services.*

*It is a geography shaped by evidence, connection, and the lived reality of how people interact with Exeter and its surrounding parishes.*

*Our proposal contends that services should be within a closer travelling distance, more accessible for users and closer to local providers. It includes the growth area to the east of the city and many areas where people travel to Exeter for employment, education, or cultural activity.*

*Local government reorganisation for Devon must reflect the unique characteristics of Exeter and Plymouth as the main drivers of growth for the whole county, while also recognising the shared identity and needs of Devon's rural and coastal communities.*

### **Three-Unitary Model for Devon**

*Therefore, this council's proposal sets out a three-unitary model:*

- the first is an urban-focussed unitary council, based on the city of Exeter and 49 surrounding Parishes.*
- the second is an urban-focussed unitary council, based on the city of Plymouth and 13 adjacent Parishes.*
- and thirdly, a rural and coastal unitary council serving the rest of Devon.*

*The proposed new unitary authority for Exeter and the surrounding area would serve a population of around 256,000 – rising to around 294,000 by 2040. Of the 49 parishes – 15 are from the current Teignbridge District Council area, 28 from East Devon and 6 from Mid Devon.*

*A reminder, Lord Mayor, that those three district councils will be abolished by April 2028, as will this council.*

### **Role of Parish and Town Councils**

*Local government reorganisation will not change the role of parish and town councils. Our final submission will propose to strengthen their role as well as the relationship between the parish councils and proposed new authorities.*

### **Financial resilience and next steps**

*Turning to the financial case, Lord Mayor, I hope members will note the transparency officers have brought to this process. Independent analysis confirms that a unitary council based on Exeter and its surrounding area would be financially resilient.*

*On key measures – population, resources, and local taxation – it would have sufficient scale to withstand financial shocks as would the other two proposed councils.*

*There are, however, some risks that we will need to address as we develop the final submission. While the analysis confirms that the proposed new council would receive sufficient income to be viable, it does not assess the costs of delivering services.*

*The reason for this is that we have not yet reached that stage in the work that would allow us to do so. At the time of drafting this report, service cost information from other councils in Devon was not yet available and, in any event, we could not model these costs until we know the geography on which the proposed new council will deliver its services.*

*Once we have completed the full assessment, we will share it with members, along with proposed models for delivering key services such as adult social care, children's services, and transport. So just to reassure Members that the next time you will hear from Officers on this issue will not be at final submission stage, we would be intending to organise briefings at significant points in the process*

### **Working with other councils**

*Lord Mayor, I would like to turn to our work with other councils.*

*As you know, the other seven district councils in Devon continue to develop the 1-5-4 model, and Exeter is not part of that work, although we do continue to work with all Devon councils, for example on data sharing and some limited resident engagement.*

*We will continue to work with all Devon councils who wish to work with us to determine how we might reflect their proposals within ours, subject of course to a financial assessment, and an assessment of the other criteria.*

*We already reflect Plymouth's proposal in our model, and we are keen to explore how Torbay's position might also be incorporated as we develop our final proposal.*

*We are open to modifying the proposed boundaries — depending on what we hear from communities and any emerging advice that we might receive from government.*

### **Closing remarks**

*To summarise, Lord Mayor, this is not just a technical exercise in redrawing boundaries. It is a chance to create a whole new model of local government – one that works better for everyone across Exeter and Devon.*

*Members' confirmation of the proposed geography tonight will allow us to take a practical step forward.*

*It allows us to start engaging with communities, refining our financial and service models, and building a submission that reflects the strengths and needs of the whole county. We have an opportunity to help design a future council that is even more responsive, more resilient, and more connected to the people it serves.*

*Lord Mayor, just before I conclude, I would like to thank my colleagues who are continuing to work diligently and thoughtfully to develop the council's submission and I commend the report to members."*

The Chief Executive answered questions from Members as follows:

- whilst risks had been identified, these had been assessed as viable;
- there was data sharing taking place with Councils across Devon;
- the Council would be taking professional advice on the delivery of services, particularly for services not currently being provided by Exeter City Council (ECC);
- the rest of Devon had been suggested for a Unitary Authority due to shared community issues;
- ECC would continue to work with Torbay Council, and try to accommodate the proposals of other Councils;
- there were three webinars scheduled for parish councillors to attend and the Council were trying where possible to go to parish councils and speak to them;
- data collected during the engagement process would be fed back to Members, inline with the consultation charter;
- it had been made clear by the Government that there would be no changes to the parish council structure;
- reassured Councillor Moore that the health of the river would be considered;
- the voices of young people would be considered where possible;
- residents of Exeter would continue to have their voices heard, but the council was considering other options such as neighbourhood communities to ensure this; and
- rural enablers could be considered during the next stage.

During debate, Opposition Group leaders made the following comments in support of the recommendations:

Councillor M Mitchell-

- welcomed this report, and clarified that he had been given a dispensation to speak by the Monitoring Officer, given that he is also a Devon County Councillor;
- the City of Exeter would form a major component of a new unitary authority;
- there was a need for those in political power to come together and propose a submission on behalf of the entire population of Devon;
- there would need to be a lower tier of local government within the city;
- bigger is not always better, it was important to focus on localism; and
- locality of government supported democracy and public participation and working together supported the delivery of the highest standards of service.

Councillor Hughes-

- thanked officers for their work on this report;
- praised the Chief Executive and the officers for answering members questions at every step;
- considered that this current proposal was the best possible option; and
- they had a preservation about future SEND provision but felt that there was a real chance to do a better job than Devon County Council had done over the last few decades.

Councillor Moore-

- thanked the Chief Executive;

- thanked the Leader for his input, and asked him to continue listening and being willing to take on feedback from the engagement;
- welcomed opportunities for the environment and the wider land and water scale;
- new unitary structures should enable strong community engagement and parish councils were the voice of local democracy;
- it was important to engage with citizens regarding service design and delivery;
- did not want buildings and open spaces to be sold to cover the cost of this transition;
- highlighted that she wanted as many things delivered by the council as possible;
- it was really important to provide updates to the community; and
- shared the concern raised by others that if the council did not come to a decision, that the decision would be made by the government.

Members made the following further comments:

Councillor R. Williams-

- asked about the localism in the 1-5-4 model or the 1 Devon Model as some of the key issues in Exeter were actually Devon County Council issues;
- this would provide a huge opportunity to deliver services for residents locally;
- other proposals offered by other local authorities seemed to be based on convenience;
- the council needed to have confidence and courage to follow the work that had already been done;
- it was important to listen to what residents had to say; and
- she encouraged officers and leader to continue as they had been.

Councillor Cookson-

- there was confusion around which Councils provided services. between Exeter City Council, and Devon County Council, and many issues within the city were problems dealt with by Devon County Council;
- within a unitary authority decisions would be made locally and with full accountability for residents;
- unitary councils often saved money by streamlining services;
- smaller councils were able to provide better services as their leaders were closer to communities;
- it was hard for residents to know what roles councillors were doing when they had more than one councillor;
- this was a strong, and responsible, proposal;
- communities already had a strong link to Exeter, and this would strengthen their identity; and
- small Councils were better at prevention and early intervention, which would help lower services costs.

Councillor Pole-

- parishes could contain many cities, and it made sense for them to be able to make comments to their higher tier representatives;
- establishing parish councils in Exeter would represent a layer of bureaucracy at local taxpayer expense; and
- establishing parishes within Exeter could lead to another two-tier system that residents already found difficult to navigate.

Councillor Wright:

- thanked Councillor Michael Mitchell for his contribution at the meeting;
- thanked the Chief Executive, Officers, and the Leader;
- the report was accessible and easy to understand;
- the original population size had been amended, and the proposed size was viable;
- it was a priority of Exeter City Council to deliver high quality and sustainable services to citizens;
- two-tiered Councils had barriers for finances, and ensuring that things were dealt with by the appropriate people;
- made it clear that no Councils were being swallowed up, and that the area was logical and highlighted local connections; and
- a unitary authority of this size stood a chance of being a superpower for residents, children that needed Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision, adult social care, potholes and the transport system. The Council already knew what was needed for the area.

Councillor Foale:

- thanked the Chief Executive, officers and the Leader;
- stated that it was important to learn from its history; and
- that he believed a unitary authority based on the proposed geography could provide better services than what was already in place.

Councillor K Mitchell:

- thanked the Chief Executive;
- he was reassured that the relationship with town councils were included in this map, and that it was important to make this relationship clear when visiting the parishes;
- expressed concern about the differences between each city ward, and that the city needed a number of Neighbourhood Councils across the whole City to prevent any disparities; and
- he had been a long advocate for unitary status but urged these concerns to be taken on board.

Leader, Councillor Bialyk:

- praised Members for the positive discussion and debate;
- he stated that he was hoping to gain unanimous support;
- felt that it was important that the Council did not replicate mistakes made previously;
- the Council needed to put a bid in for the 28<sup>th</sup> of November;
- the democratic deficit was important, and this would provide an opportunity for people living in the proposed area to have a say on what happens in Exeter;
- Alphington, Topsham, and Pinhoe had not always been part of the city, and that the city had evolved;
- he did not know who the Leader of the new authority would be and it was not for the current Council to dictate all the policies;
- the unitary would be based partly on the results of the financial modelling;
- it would not be the new council's intention to carry on delivering services as they had been delivered by DCC;
- this would be the best change to local government in the city for nearly 50 years; and
- he and the Chief Executive were both happy to talk with others and wanted to achieve the best possible option for all of Devon.

Following a vote, the recommendations were CARRIED.



(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 7.27 pm)

Chair