

APPENDIX 1

Background – English Devolution White Paper and current governance arrangements for local authorities in Devon

- 1 The Government published the English Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024. As discussed in a previous report to Council, the Government is committed to the devolution of powers from central Government to Strategic Authorities. The White Paper identified that Strategic Authorities would be made up of unitary and not two-tier local authority areas. Through a process of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), there will be the abolition of all remaining two-tier local government areas across England.
- 2 Government has set out six criteria they will use in determining the most appropriate local government structures for each area, these being:
 1. A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned in the establishment of a single tier of local government
 2. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks
 3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens
 4. Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views
 5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements
 6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.
- 3 In the short time given for putting forward an interim submission, the city council organised an externally facilitated session with the Exeter Partnership which took place on 6th March 2024. This informed the city council's submission and supported the use of six key principles in determining the right option for Devon. These are:
 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.
- 4 Considering Devon's large geographical area with small, dispersed populations and its two major urban areas of Exeter and Plymouth, the interim submission to Government set out the city council's view that any proposals for reorganisation must reflect the unique characteristics of cities that drive growth for the benefit of the whole county as this will benefit Devon by reflecting our communities' sense of place, identity, and crucially, prioritising economic growth.
- 5 Council considered the approach and approved an interim submission at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council on 20th March 2025.

About Local Government Reorganisation

- 6 In December 2024, the UK government unveiled an ambitious plan to bring power out of Whitehall and closer to the people as it set out to revolutionise the way local councils work. The idea is to streamline local government and to deliver services that are

APPENDIX 1

seamlessly integrated and easily accessible. The plan involves merging lower and upper-tier councils into single unitary authorities, eliminating the confusion and inefficiencies of the current two-tier system. The aim is for quicker responses to local issues and a more straightforward experience for residents.

- 7 The Government issued a call to action, inviting local councils to embark on a journey of reorganisation – coming forward with plans that will offer:
 - **Clarity and simplicity:** Residents have one clear point of contact for all their needs. Whether it's waste collection, housing, or education, everything is handled under one roof, making life easier and more straightforward for everyone.
 - **Cost Savings:** Cutting unnecessary bureaucracy saves money. Unitary councils achieve this by eliminating duplicate services and streamlining operations. Financial savings that can then be reinvested into vital community services.
 - **Financial Stability:** Having a local council that is financially stable and able to deliver quality services, despite the challenges ahead.
 - **Service Integration:** Imagine a community where services are seamlessly integrated, providing a higher quality of life for all.

How the two-tier system currently operates in Devon

- 8 Plymouth City Council is already an urban unitary authority covering the city and there is a smaller unitary authority covering the coastal area of Torbay.
- 9 All residents living in the rest of Devon have at least two councils delivering services to them, those in districts with Town and Parish Councils will have three. There are eight district councils providing a range of services to local communities. These are called lower tier councils as decision making and service delivery is focused on local communities.
- 10 Devon County Council is an upper tier council providing services across Devon. Around 76% of residents' Council Tax which is collected by districts is passed to be spent by Devon Council to fund services across the whole of Devon. The services that each tier of council provide are:
 - **Upper tier:** Devon County Council provides services that cover the whole of Devon such as education, strategic transport planning, highways, managing street lighting, parking, childrens' services, adult social care, public health, trading standards and waste disposal.
 - **Lower tier:** Exeter City and the other Devon District Councils are smaller councils providing local services only for the people living in their area such as housing and homeless prevention, environmental health, local planning, leisure and culture facilities, parks, waste collection and recycling services.
- 11 **Parish and Town Councils** are smaller, hyper-local level councils. Parish and Town Council activities fall into three categories: delivering services to meet local needs, giving the community a voice and representation, and improving the quality of life and community wellbeing. Their only legal duty is to provide allotments, but they also have powers to run local neighbourhood facilities including community buildings, parks, playgrounds, open spaces, and public toilets.
- 12 LGR will not change the role of Parish or Town Councils. They will still exist. The city council's final proposal will seek to strengthen the role of Parish and Town Councils.

APPENDIX 1

- 13 In Devon, LGR is focussed on the County Council and District Councils. The idea is to streamline local government, making sure that services are seamlessly integrated and easily accessible. Residents will have one council providing all their services. The plan involves merging lower and upper-tier councils into single unitary authorities, eliminating the confusion and inefficiencies of the two-tier system.

Other Devon Council Interim Submissions

- 14 There were several different options in the interim proposals from Devon authorities, summarised in the table below. Devon County Council were the only authority to propose a single unitary council for the whole of Devon as one of their six options. There is, however, broad agreement locally that a single, Devon-wide unitary council is not the right approach, and this is not supported by any other authorities in Devon.
- 15 The city council's submission did not support the proposed "1-5-4" model that the remaining Devon district councils put forward in March 2025. This proposal was, and continues to be, developed without input from the city council which removes the opportunity to explore with the other districts alternative approaches.

Figure 1: Summary of Interim Submissions by Devon Authorities (March 2025)

Exeter City Council: 1 Option	
Three unitary councils for Devon with a distinct focus on market towns and rural communities as well as Devon's two major cities of Exeter and Plymouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No boundaries proposed
Devon County Council: 6 Options	
2 Unitary Councils: Plymouth and Rest of Devon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Plymouth Rest of Devon
2 Unitary Councils: North and South Devon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> South: Plymouth, South Hams, Torbay and Teignbridge North: North Devon, Torridge, West Devon, Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter
2 Unitary Councils: South West and North East Devon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> South West: Plymouth, South Hams and West Devon North East: North Devon, Torridge, Mid Devon, East Devon, Exeter, Teignbridge and Torbay
3 Unitary Councils: Plymouth, Greater Exeter and Rest of Devon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Plymouth Greater Exeter: Exeter, Mid Devon and East Devon Rest of Devon: North Devon, Torridge, West Devon, Teignbridge, South Hams and Torbay

APPENDIX 1

<p>3 Unitary Councils: North East and South West ("1-5-4")</p> <p>1 Unitary Council: Whole of Devon</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plymouth 2. North East: North Devon, Torridge, Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter 3. South West: West Devon, Teignbridge, South Hams and Torbay <p>• Devon Unitary</p>
Plymouth City Council:	
1 Option for Plymouth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plymouth plus 13 Parishes: Bickleigh, Shaugh Prior, Sparkwell, Brixton, Wembury, Cornwood, Harford, Ugborough, Ivybridge, Ermington, Yealmpton, Holberton and Newton and Noss
Torbay Council	
<p>3 Options for Torbay: 1 unitary council for Torbay 1 unitary council and expanded Torbay</p> <p>1 unitary council and expanded Torbay</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Torbay as is 2. Torbay and South Devon: Torbay plus catchment area of the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust (50% South Hams and 80% Teignbridge) 3. Southern Devon Council: Torbay, South Hams, West Devon and Teignbridge
East Devon, North Devon, Mid Devon, South Hams, Teignbridge, Torridge District Councils and West Devon Borough Council plus Torbay Council	
<p>1 Option proposing 3 unitary councils for Devon "1-5-4" Model: Proposed by district councils, Torbay and one of Devon County Council options</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plymouth (1) 2. Exeter and Northern Devon (5): North Devon, Torridge, Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter 3. Southern Devon (4): West Devon, Teignbridge, South Hams and Torbay

- 16 Whilst there were different permutations of the constituent areas there does seem to be some current consensus across Devon for three unitary councils.
- 17 Councils in Devon received feedback from MHCLG on 15 May 2025, a copy of this letter is attached at Appendix 2.