

EXECUTIVE

Wednesday 26 November 2025

Present:

Councillor Bialyk (Chair)

Councillors Wright, Asvachin, Foale, Patrick, Vizard, Williams, R and Wood

Also present:

Councillor Haigh (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor Holland (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor M. Mitchell (as an opposition group Leader); and

Councillor Moore (as an opposition group Leader).

Also present:

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

86

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

87

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION: DRAFT SUBMISSION-PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST IN EXETER AND DEVON

The Executive received the report which set out Exeter City Council's draft final submission to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Devon and responded to the Government's invitation for submissions and demonstrated compliance with Government's criteria.

The report outlined resource implications, legal requirements, proposed geography, stakeholder engagement, and a timetable for implementation, with new Councils expected to be legally constituted on 1 April 2028.

The draft final submission was considered by a special meeting of the full Council on 25th November 2025 and received almost unanimous support.

The Leader moved and Councillor Wright seconded two amendments to the recommendations to:

- 1) amend recommendation 2.2 to change all instances of the word '**adjacent**' to "**surrounding.**" and
- 2) add an additional recommendation, as follows:
 - 2.3 That Executive agrees to a Joint Submission with Plymouth City Council to be presented as a shared Executive Summary with the two individual proposals as appendices. Members are asked to note that Plymouth City Council supported this approach and its Cabinet agreed a similar recommendation at their meeting on 24 November 2025.

The Chief Executive spoke to the report and advised that:

- Members were familiar with the draft submission's content from the Council meeting on 25 November 2025, as well as through various briefings held over the past six weeks;
- the Council had developed a draft proposal that addressed the government's criteria, which adhered to the Exeter principles and was legally compliant; and
- that subject to the Executive's approval, a joint submission would be made with Plymouth City Council, featuring a joint executive summary with both Council's full proposals attached as appendices.

The Leader advised that the recommendations were seeking delegated authority to enable the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader to make further minor amendments to the proposal before it was submitted on the 28 November 2025.

The Leader noted the comments made at Council on 25 November for official recording, which he advised had been responded to at that meeting:

- neighbourhood plans, including the current St. James plan, should be treated distinctly;
- the city's status as a City of Sanctuary must be maintained to ensure it remained a safe city for everyone;
- concerns were raised about the large size of the proposed coast and countryside areas;
- a request was made to engage communities on how they wished to work together;
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) needed to be central to the new authority, and not an afterthought;
- there was a hope for enhanced SEND services that would work with communities and the third sector, to approach it differently.

The Leader referred to the requests from Members raised at the full Council and responded as follows:

Request for a youth council to be created

- The request for a youth council to be created was noted and the ambition to strengthen the voice of young people in shaping services was shared. However, it would be for the future unitary authority to decide whether to establish a youth council or a similar structure as part of its wider democratic framework.
- A Devon County Council social media post indicated that a Youth Council had recently been established.

Purpose, role and budget of Neighbourhood Area Committees (NAC) must be clear and requested that some of the detail be included in the bid.

- The Council was waiting for further government guidance on this issue.
- The Council was recommending that the new unitary councils use their devolved powers under Part 4 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to run Community Governance Reviews to establish local governance arrangements, which NACs could be included as part of that process.
- When co-designed and properly resourced, NACs would strengthen accountability, bringing decision-making closer to residents, and give the new authorities clearer, stronger community representation.

To consider a democratic deficit and relationship between NACs and Parish Councils

- In unparished areas like Exeter, Plymouth, and Torbay, Neighbourhood Area Committees (NAC) would provide a currently missing democratic link to address the deficit;
- In areas with existing town and parish councils, the committees would work alongside them as part of a coherent framework and would not be replacing or duplicating their work.
- There was no proposal to remove assets or powers from existing town and parish councils.
- Political discussions were ongoing regarding the creation of new parishes with devolved responsibilities, but it was not appropriate to address it in the submission. It would be raised as an important issue during any future governance review.

Community Governance Review to use 'should' rather than 'could'

- A minor change to the report from 'should' to 'could' would make little practical difference, given the decision to undertake a Community Governance Review would ultimately sit with the new unitary authority and Government.

To consider strategic housing as there is no mention on what would happen to Exeter's housing stock, which the Council should be proud of. To request a clear commitment to Exeter growing the number of council houses it had

- The issue of Exeter's Housing stock would be articulated in the Implementation Plans.
- Exeter's housing stock was a major strength and the submission reinforced the city's long-standing commitment to growing the number of council homes and expanding high-quality, affordable houses.
- A unitary authority for Exeter and its surrounding area would strengthen strategic housing delivery, particularly across the major growth areas to the east and southwest of the city.
- Bringing housing, planning, transport and infrastructure into one authority would remove the fragmentation that stalled the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan and ensure new communities had schools, health provision and transport in place from the outset.
- The new authority would also be better placed to respond to homelessness and rough sleeping through integrated services, stronger prevention work and clearer accountability.

Ambitions for SEND transitions should go beyond being safe and legal

- The phrase "safe and legal" was the term used in the government's invitation to highlight the need for these crucial services being safe and legal from day one of the new councils.
- Shadow councils will have plans to mitigate service delivery risks during the transition, particularly for vulnerable people.
- The new authority was expected to use the reorganisation as an opportunity to redesign service pathways, integrate services, and provide families with clearer, more responsive support.

Request to ask the government to fund transitions in order to be realistic about significant debt, which forecast savings can only come after redundancies whilst SEND and social care will remain high costs

- The government had stated that LGR transitions were expected to be funded by the local authorities involved.
- Financial modelling indicated that the transition could be fully funded with a payback within three years, projecting cumulative savings of approximately £500 million over ten years, even with high-cost pressures like SEND and social care.
- During the next stage of the work, officers will continue to work with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and ascertain where any funding or resources might be available.

Ask Executive to reflect on what community is

- The proposal was designed to strengthen community engagement and protect the distinct identities of both rural and urban areas.
- The model had been shaped with a clear focus on communities and place and aimed to create genuine opportunities for neighbourhood impact while recognising and protecting the strong sense of place and cohesion that exists across different areas.

That possibilities for transport be considered (Bus Service Act) including bus services and re-doubling railway lines to increase services and therefore remove congestion from the roads.

- Transport was a central component of the case for local government reorganisation.
- A single unitary authority could use powers from the Bus Services Act more effectively to plan bus, rail and road networks in a coordinated manner.
- Integrating transport with housing, planning, and infrastructure would create conditions for more reliable bus services, better connections, and integrated ticketing.
- This unified approach strengthened the strategic case for rail and freight investment, including increased capacity and service frequency on key lines, with the goal of reducing congestion and supporting sustainable travel.

The Leader referred to submitted request from Councillor Michael Mitchell and responded as follows:

- If Exeter become a unitary authority, it should have a seat on the Combined County Authority (CCA) to ensure transferred powers continued to benefit residents. The decision rested with the future unitary authority, but it was assumed that any new council, regardless of political party, would want to be a constituent member.
- The proposal did not include creating new parishes in unparished areas like Exeter, Torbay, and Plymouth, but instead proposed to use neighbourhood area committees in those locations to address the democratic deficit.
- Those committees would not replace or duplicate the work of existing town and parish councils and government lobbying would continue to review the issue of for currently unparished urban areas but was not required as part of the current submission.

- A core part of the proposal was to strengthen the democratic voice and Neighbourhood Area Committees were intended to give councillors more local influence over priorities, funding, and decision-making.
- The specific delegated powers for those committees would be a matter for the shadow authorities to determine.

Executive Members spoke to the report and points raised at Council and made the following points:

- a diagram on page 185 of the report appeared to show town and parish councils sitting hierarchically below neighbourhood area committees, and it was suggested that the diagram be changed to present the neighbourhood area committees and the town/parish councils within the same tier or colour band;
- a suggestion was made to include Exeter's successful cross-council environmental work in the submission, notably the South East Devon Habitat Mitigation Committee strategy, and referring to the successful work undertaken would strengthen the submission's section on environmental management;
- the submission already included provisions for neighbourhood plans and addressed the concerns about local planning input;
- the proposal would enable closer working between environmental health officers and communities, as well as with Trading Standards for joined-up enforcement;
- the appointment of a single Director of Public Health would be critical for developing strategies like a city-wide air quality strategy, which required coordination with highways and transport;
- reorganisation would resolve inefficiencies in waste collection, such as waste from Alphington being collected by Teignbridge instead of being processed at the nearby Exeter plant;
- gratitude was expressed for the extensive work undertaken on the proposal;
- the city's City of Sanctuary status should be formally acknowledged in the submission document to reflect this status;
- the point raised about engaging communities on how they wish to work together under the new structure was endorsed;
- there had been significant engagement with community groups, stakeholders, individuals, and businesses which would continue;
- establishing a Youth Council was important to address the needs of young people, but would be a matter for the new unitary council to determine;
- the LGR (Local Government Reorganisation) survey report, included a significant proportion of young people with 23% of those interviewed in targeted groups being in the 16-24 age bracket;
- it was acknowledged that there had been frustration that more feedback wasn't received from younger groups but the work and learning had been very beneficial;
- follow-up conversations had been held with the Head of Service to discuss moving forward with engagement for groups like care leavers and schools;
- there was importance in strengthening the "sense of place" across both rural and urban areas;
- the point raised at Council regarding transport possibilities was endorsed, and the city's railway stations represented a significant opportunity for growth in passenger numbers if managed correctly;
- the unitary proposal was a critical opportunity to advance climate goals and adopt a full approach to governance;
- the joint approach with Plymouth was important and would strengthen the proposal from Exeter;

- the Leaders address of all considerations from the Council meeting was commended;
- the report was highly comprehensive, and meant that some Members, found responses to questions upon further reading;
- it was highlighted that the primary focus must be on the government's criteria for the proposal;
- the purpose of this meeting was to approve the proposal and decisions about future operations of the unitary authority were not for the current council to make;
- since the new unitary would cover a larger area than just the City of Exeter, the matter relating to being a City of Sanctuary would be a consideration for future trustees of the mayoralty to ensure city-specific aspects continued;
- the reference to Torbay's Children's Services and Education was welcomed as a good example of improvements made since becoming a unitary authority;
- concerns raised about transitional costs and financing were covered in section 4.1 the report;
- the joint submission with Plymouth was a significant strength, which demonstrated regional agreement, which was something the government wanted;
- the proposal met the required criteria set out by Government;
- the proposal was not intended to contain all the processes and regulations of the new authority and that other government guidelines existed;
- the MHCLG had confirmed that the legal status of local plans would not be impacted by local government reorganisation and the Exeter Plan, (currently with the planning inspectorate) once adopted would remain in place until a new plan for the new authority was created;
- the adopted St. James plan would continue to be a significant factor in planning decisions for that area;
- any new local plan would likely have similar levels of engagement and consultation and also would consider existing plans;
- under the devolution criteria, unitary authorities would have greater resources and strategic coordination to protect local identities;
- the creation of a unitary authority would have a long-term positive effect on preventing homelessness by joining up with SEND services;
- a unitary authority would provide a more integrated approach to housing to facilitate the growth of the housing stock;
- it was hoped that community would be a focal point of future discussions;
- the comprehensive report provided a high-quality analysis evidencing how the proposal could work well to deliver essential services;
- the proposal in comparison to other proposals was of a much higher standard and demonstrated a change meaningful was possible for such a massive impact on individuals' lives and future generations;
- residents both in Exeter and surrounding communities as far as Exmouth had been engaged and saw the advantages of the plan;
- there was a current dissatisfaction with Devon County Council from significant residents, notably with a perceived lack of accountability and transparency; and
- bringing together local plans under one authority would create cohesiveness and strategic control, building on the well-researched community plans that already exist.

Executive Members commended the report and expressed support for the submission.

The Leader responded to some of the points raised as follows:

- he acknowledged a Councillor's passion and detailed questions about their portfolio, but advised that many of these questions pertain to the operational delivery of a future unitary authority;
- he clarified that the current focus was on the submission to government, rather than on the day-to-day operational details of running the new authority;
- operational matters, such as the appointment of a Director of Public Health, would be addressed by the new authority once it was formed;
- the Executive had thoroughly considered the issues raised; and
- he acknowledged the importance of the City of Sanctuary status, especially at the current time and would look to ensure that it would be incorporated into the submission document.

The Leader thanked the Executive Members for their contributions during the debate and their reflections on how the proposal affected their respective portfolios.

The Leader invited leaders of the opposition groups to speak, focussing on providing any new information or suggestions to the recommendations, rather than repeating points from the Council meeting.

Opposition group leaders raised the following points and questions:

- concerns were raised about local democracy not being adequately addressed in the proposal and if contributions from the Council discussions were not incorporated into the proposal, the time and energy spent would have been wasted;
- the issues relating to the river Exe, were not sufficiently acknowledged as an important issue, which was considered a severe oversight as the proposal would inform the new authority's work plan;
- there was a need for an early community governance review, and delaying it until after the new authority was established could mean it would get lost;
- there was a perceived inconsistency in the proposal, which mentioned charter trustees and neighbourhood committees running alongside each other, whilst stating a community governance review for the current city of Exeter would be delayed;
- the point about strengthening local, frontline democracy through town councils was crucial for a larger unitary authority with fewer principal councillors, but it felt as though this concern was not being heard;
- a joint proposal with Plymouth was commended and would add strength to the submission to Westminster;
- having attended multiple briefings, it was considered that officers and Members had crafted a very robust and realistic proposal for Devon;
- it was surprising and disappointing that other Devon Council Leaders had disregarded Exeter's bid, given other proposals were overly elaborate; and
- a Greater Exeter Unitary Authority would provide solutions to national challenges and supported the adoption of the proposals.

The Leader in responding to the points raised from opposition group leaders advised:

- thanked the group leader for his supportive comments and endorsement from another political group;
- he acknowledged the opposition group leaders disappointment, but advised that the desired details could not be provided currently and Council was following a set process; and

- if his political group continued to have a lead role in the new unitary authority, they would be committed to working with neighbourhood councils, towns, and parishes.

The Leader in concluding the debate thanked all Members for their contributions and the cross-party support for the principle of a unitary authority based around Exeter and its communities. He also expressed his gratitude to the officers for their hard work in bringing the proposal forward.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously.

RESOLVED that Executive:

- (1) agrees the Draft Final Proposal for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Devon;
- (2) support the creation of four proposed new unitary councils (the geographic details of which were outlined in the report) as follows:
 - a Unitary council for Exeter and surrounding parishes;
 - a Unitary council for Plymouth and surrounding parishes;
 - a Unitary council for Torbay and surrounding parishes; and
 - a Unitary council for the Devon Coast and Countryside.
- (3) agree to a Joint Submission with Plymouth City Council to present a shared Executive Summary with the two individual proposals as appendices. Members noted that Plymouth City Council supported this approach and their Cabinet agreed a similar recommendation at their meeting on 24 November 2025.
- (4) grant delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to make any further minor amendments to the LGR proposal prior to its submission to Government by 28 November 2025.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.33 pm)

Chair

The decisions indicated will normally come into force 5 working days after publication of the Statement of Decisions unless called in by a Scrutiny Committee. Where the matter in question is urgent, the decision will come into force immediately.