EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Thursday 20 March 2025

Present:

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

Councillors Asvachin, Atkinson, Banyard, Begley, Bennett, Bialyk, Darling, Fullam, Haigh, Harding, Holland, Hughes, Hussain, Jobson, Ketchin, Knott, Miller-Boam, Mitchell, K, Mitchell, M, Moore, Palmer, Parkhouse, Patrick, Read, Rees, Rolstone, Snow, Vizard, Wardle, Williams, M, Wood and Wright

Apologies:- Councillors Ketchin, Pole, Sheridan, Williams, R, and Wetenhall

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Head of Service - Finance, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer (LS)

5 ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE LORD MAYOR

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

"The report for this evening's 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 prior to the meeting.

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

At the Extraordinary Council meeting held on 9 January 2025, we received an urgent report concerning the Council's proposed response to the Minister of State concerning the English Devolution White paper. Members will recall that Council resolved on that occasion to support the submission of a Letter of Intent to government by 10 January 2025 indicating Exeter City Council's opposition to any future proposal for one unitary council for Devon and expressed Exeter's intention to submit interim plans for unitary status for Exeter once the invitation had been received from government. The resolution was unanimously supported by Members and the letter of intent was duly submitted.

Following the Extraordinary meeting of Council, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, sent a letter dated 5 February 2025 to the Leaders of two-tier and unitary councils in Devon - formally inviting proposals for local government reorganisation. In that letter, the Minister of State required local authorities to submit an interim plan on or before 21 March 2025 with a full proposal to be submitted by 28 November 2025.

The time between receipt of the letter dated 5 February 2025 and the requirement to submit an interim plan on or before 21 March 2025 is extremely short and substantial efforts have been made to put the interim submission before you in advance of the submission date.

Despite the interim proposals not being published with five clear days' notice, I consider that there are special circumstances to justify proceeding to consider the report and proposals this evening.

Those reasons are that there was a short period of time between the invitation from the Minister of State to submit interim proposals and the deadline by which those interim proposals have to be submitted to the Minister.

If the interim proposals are not issued to the Minister of State by Friday 21 March, then the Council's position will be compromised. The interim proposals and the requirement to submit them to the Minister of State within a short timescale means that the issues need to be considered and determined by this Council as a matter of urgency and cannot be delayed. We will therefore proceed to consider the report and the interim proposals for submission to the Minister of State."

6 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were made.

7 **URGENT REPORT - LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION - INTERIM SUBMISSION**

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

1) That Council approves the interim submission for local government reorganisation at Appendix A.

2) That Council supports the proposal to engage with a range of stakeholders, including Exeter's residents, residents in surrounding areas, businesses, key partners, other councils in Devon, in the development of a final business case for local government reorganisation due to be submitted in November 2025.

Councillor Wright seconded the recommendations.

The Chief Executive introduced the report making the following statement:

"Lord Mayor, in his letter of the fifth of February, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution invited Leaders of councils in two-tier areas to submit proposals for a single tier of local government. The letter asked for interim submissions to be sent to the government by the 21st of March, with a full business case submitted by the 28th of November. On the ninth of February, this Council agreed the indicate to the minister that we intend to make a submission seeking unitary status and we are therefore here this evening to ask members to approve this Council's submission ahead of tomorrow's deadline.

Officers believe that there is a compelling case for establishing a unitary authority for the historic city of Exeter and the surrounding area and that our submission will give assurance to members this evening as well as the government that we have a clear approach and methodology on which to build this case by the end of November.

In our submission Lord Mayor, we have considered the criteria set out by government along with key principles on which we will build our case, these include:

- Growth, Transport and Connectivity
- Ensuring an appropriate focus on both urban and rural issues in order to address inequality and local needs
- Accessibility to public services
- A sense of place and community
- A balanced population size and demographic, and finally, and of vital importance of course,
- Financial viability and value for money for taxpayers.

The principles have been developed through an evidence-led approach and have been used to assess initial options for local government reorganisation.

Because of our commitment to be led by evidence, Lord Mayor, our interim submission does not include an arbitrary map which identifies the boundaries for the proposed new council. This would not have been done with any robustness in the five weeks that we have had to develop our submission. We also have not been able to put forward a structure for the rest of the county as we have not been included in the plans developed by the remaining seven Devon district councils and therefore we do not feel that it is appropriate for us to suggest a structure that covers their area without their input.

We will work, using the criteria set for us and the principles set out to develop proposals for the geographic area once we have consulted appropriately and done the relevant financial modelling to ensure that proposed new councils across the Devon area deliver positive outcomes for the whole county.

We believe that to be financially viable but still retain local identity and a clear focus on the urban issues for the area, the proposed new council will serve, after planned growth, a population of between 300,000 and 350,000 expanding the current city council boundary into some wards and parishes surrounding the city.

The next stage in the development of our Business Case will be to collate and analyse additional data and evidence, collaborate with councils in our area and engage stakeholders and communities to develop a rational and cohesive solution that works for Exeter and Devon.

Our submission identifies that the proposed new council will streamline governance, reduce duplication, and ensure a place-based approach to policy making and service delivery. It also highlights how growth will lead to more jobs for local people and opportunities for businesses.

I wanted to return Lord Mayor to the issue of local engagement. We have already discussed key issues that will inform our Business Case with our valued partners in the Exeter Partnership but the five-week timescale to develop our submission has not allowed us to engage with our residents or other stakeholders across the various sectors.

Members are being asked to support a comprehensive programme of engagement with a range of stakeholders including Exeter's residents, residents in surrounding areas, businesses, key public sector and other partners and other councils in Devon.

This will include workshops, public surveys, and engagement with local authorities and town and parish councils - and regular updates and consultations with

businesses, communities and residents. On the relationship with towns and parish councils Lord Mayor, in the spirit of this council's renewed approach to community engagement as demonstrated in our recent work on our budget priorities and draft corporate plan, we intend that the proposed new council will develop a partnership approach to working with those town and parish councils that are at the heart of their communities.

Turning to next steps Lord Mayor, MHCLG have confirmed that they will provide feedback on interim submissions, to support our work on developing the final Business Case but they will not rule out any options at this stage recognising that there is further, more detailed work that councils need to continue to develop.

We will therefore work to bring before members a full business case for approval for submission by 28 November.

There will then be a Government-led public consultation between January and April next year with a decision on the proposals to reorganise local government being made between May and August next year. Elections to shadow unitary councils are expected to take place between May to December 2027 with new councils coming into being in April 2028.

Finally, Lord Mayor, I'd like to thank Members for their support and contribution to the council's work on local government reorganisation to date. Indeed, the unanimous support of all members at the last Extraordinary Council meeting on 9 January which agreed our expression of interest to government, was a huge source of motivation for officers who have worked at pace but with great care over the last five weeks to develop the submission, for which I sincerely thank them."

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

"In moving this Lord Mayor, I can say that Local government reorganisation means change for everyone and new councils representing new geographical boundaries will need to emerge.

A unitary authority for Exeter and the surrounding area would strengthen local democracy by ensuring that local decision-making aligns with the distinct needs of urban and rural communities. This has been a long-held ambition of this council and as members will recall, we have previously developed a successful bid for unitary status, in 2010, before that was taken away from us.

Exeter is one of the UK's fastest-growing cities, playing a pivotal role in driving economic and housing growth across the wider region. As a key member of the Key Cities Network, Exeter actively contributes to national infrastructure strategies. We play a crucial role in local and regional governance, and its economic importance extends well beyond its administrative boundaries.

Exeter is a young city with a rapidly growing population and strong businesses and industry sectors. We are ideally positioned to lead investment, innovation, and connectivity across Devon. The city is an economic powerhouse, outperforming the UK average in economic output per capita. It has a strong economy, driven by the University of Exeter, Exeter Science Park, the Met Office, and more than 4,000 businesses – a growth of eight per cent since 2019.

Exeter is a key strategic transport hub, connecting the South West to London and beyond via road, rail and air.

Our submission highlights the cost-efficiency of a unitary model, reducing overhead costs associated with multiple councils covering the same area. Exeter has a rapidly-growing population of 130,800 – and a travel-to-work area of almost 500,000.

A new council covering Exeter will expand beyond the city council boundary into wards and parishes surrounding the city. These are Exeter travel-to-work areas with a strong sense of identity to the city, fostered by its major institutions.

As the Chief Executive explained, we are not including a map of the proposed boundaries at the stage until the planned period of public engagement has been completed.

The government has stated its clear intention for reorganisation and devolution, so what are the alternatives to a unitary for the Exeter area?

There is broad agreement locally that a single, Devon-wide unitary authority is not the right approach. We also cannot support the proposed 1-5-4 model Devon district councils are putting forward. It is disappointing that this proposal has been developed without input from Exeter. If so I might have explained to them that excluding residents from the other side of the Devon Hotel is actually a mistake as they feel they live in Exeter. This 1-5-4 model has no logic – it recognises one of Devon's two cities, Plymouth, is deserving of its unitary status, but Exeter, which is one of the fastest-growing cities in the UK, doesn't. It implies that Exeter has more in common with rural and coastal communities in North Devon than it does with many of the towns and communities right on our own doorstep. That just doesn't make any sense. In my opinion this is simply a political plan that does not address the economic issues or the needs of the people of Devon, and it must be rejected.

Lord Mayor, Exeter is very distinct from Devon's rural and coastal communities – everybody knows that. It is vital we retain our sense of place and prioritise economic growth, using the strength of our city as the catalyst for growth in the rest of Devon. As councillors representing the residents and communities of this great city, we must all embrace the opportunity to deliver improved outcomes for those we serve. We're ready to work with neighbouring councils and all the residents and communities they represent. Their input will be vital in ensuring reorganisation delivers on the ambition to empower local communities.

So, I hope members can unanimously back our submission to government. It's the start, Lord Mayor of a long road and history tells us that the long march started with the first step and this is indeed the first step. Our city needs to be part of a unitary authority for the area covering just beyond the current city boundary, which would be a truly transformational opportunity for Devon. We now have a once in a generation opportunity to achieve that. If we do, we will continue to drive the economy for the city, for the rest of Devon and the region as a whole and deliver for the residents and communities of Exeter and beyond. The structure we outline aligns with the government's devolution objectives, strengthens economic growth and enhances local democracy.

Our submission builds on the case for delivering improved public services whilst ensuring Exeter and the wider region remain competitive, sustainable and resilient for the future."

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

Councillor Mitchell:

- in representing our local communities this was a once in a lifetime chance to have our voices heard;
- suggested that all group leaders were invited to meetings rather than just Council Leaders;
- he challenged the questions set by government, would they provide the best solution for semi-rural Devon;
- building blocks of complete district council areas used artificial boundaries from 1972 and based on Victorian boundaries and questioned whether these made sense in 2025;
- collaboration could already be seen with Strata as an example;
- there were concerns regarding Devon County Council (DCC) services and the need for larger authorities for economies of scale;
- a federation system would allow economies of scale and everyone would receive the same standard of service regardless of where they were;
- town and parish councils could work in collaboration with a unitary authority and consider asset transfer;
- local government finance had not been mentioned and required reform before anything else; and
- the best for Exeter and Devon would be best achieved by listening and working together.

Councillor Jobson:

It was important that residents in Exeter and surrounding areas learned more about the council and all matters in the report in order to reassure them that we were not looking to take over their local parish councils as they had a lot to contribute.

Councillor Moore:

- the global happiness index was published today and the UK had dropped one place to 20th
- Government was a driver for growth and good quality of life in Exeter had been highlighted;
- a positive economy was not the only measure of wellbeing;
- the current model was unsustainable and local economic strategies led by local people were needed;
- the creation of good jobs was needed in order to create local wealth and public authorities played a key role;
- Government required an arbitrary 500,000 population but it was essential that local rural economies thought about their focus and look to strengthen;
- She would support a larger number of smaller unitaries across Devon and inviting our communities in would be essential;
- the financial pressure of austerity and rising demand for services required that the council ask for help with the costs of reorganisation;
- the council should focus on what we can control and negotiate cooperatively;
- expressed gratitude for the Leader's cooperative approach;
- Exeter is a generous and friendly city and she hoped that this approach encouraged our neighbours to join us.

Members made the following further comments:

Councillor Hughes

- Exeter was a city and deserved to stand on its own;
- rising incidences of hate speech and being treated with disrespect and expanding boundaries would bring marginalised people into the protection experienced in the city; and
- they were keen to learn more about the relationship with the Police and Crime Commissioner's Office.

Councillor Harding

Supported the recommendations given that the residents on the border of his ward identified with Alphington rather than Teignbridge or Newton Abbot and as a unitary authority there could be achievements with the bus service.

Councillor Atkinson

- spoke in support of the unitary option and was disappointed as a County Councillor for Alphington that DCC did not include this option
- there were only 2 metres separating developments which were marketed as Alphington and named South West Exeter not North West Teignbridge; and
- Pinhoe ward had the same situation.

Councillor Rolstone

- spoke in support and cited a resident who asked for support with a list of county issues;
- unitary was needed to support residents as councillors;
- there would also be an opportunity for the education system; and
- there were amazing educational establishments in the city and surrounding area and an opportunity to be revolutionary.

Councillor Palmer

- spoke in support and expressed frustration with national Government posing several questions, on timing, and that 5 weeks was insufficient for a complex submission;
- thanked all political leaders at the Council and the Chief Executive and Leader for the work done in such a short space of time;
- it was disappointing that other councils had not engaged;
- there would only be a positive outcome for Devon residents if political colours were put aside on this issue; and
- expressed hope that Exeter would be the council who role modelled good collaboration, extensive public consultation and that we were willing to extend our hand.

Councillor Rees

- welcomed the cross-party approach and commitment to genuine consultation and engagement with communities;
- communities were valued; and
- it would be good to see one consultation process across the county with a consistent framework which would provide an outcome which give meaningful information.

Councillor Wardle

Spoke in support and suggested that there might be an opportunity to put right mistakes makes on the railway as the population growth seen had not been expected. Long loops cold be reinstated to allow trains to cross therefore increasing capacity rather than new roads.

Councillor Fullam

- was attracted by the scale of this recommendation;
- he felt that an area which was too large would not support local concerns; ;
- consensus about the way forward was needed;
- there were no boundaries in the report and these could be tricky;
- collaboration was a good way forward;
- with many options on the table, the government may make decisions on the Council's behalf and asked what the Leaders vision was;
- language was important and merging could already been seen in Devon Home Choice; and
- devolving to local areas but driven from Exeter would be a positive approach and generosity of language would diminish resistance.

Councillor Read

- welcomed the report being accessible and residents would be able to pick up read and understand;
- agreed with bring back rail tracks, more trains and longer trains;
- recognised that there would be fears in communities and perhaps loss of local connection in the 154 model;
- joined up local government was a very exciting prospect with greater strategic actions to protect nature;
- there was 50% biodiversity left intact which was considered poor;
- a larger decision-making area could have protection of nature as a key priority including addressing water pollution;
- asked that when boundaries were considered, that the Council look at a bio-regional approach supported by doughnut economics and that rights of nature be integrated into corporate strategy; and
- local resilience in the face of climate change shocks faced meant more than warmer weather, greater risk of flooding and wildfires and storms and must ensure the right balance was struck.

Councillor Read left the meeting at this point of the meeting.

Councillor Vizard

- spoke in support as putting residents and the city first was a priority for decision making;
- it was clear that the joint passion for the city shone through;
- welcomed future collaboration with other councils, stakeholders, businesses and residents across the coming months; and
- biodiversity and nature recovery should be front and centre of our plans.

Councillor Bennett

- November was not far away and priority must be on speaking to residents and stakeholders not just about this but also about the cost;

- offering certainty to council staff especially with huge pressures on them already would be important;
- with the £100,000 set aside how will we ensure it won't all go to a few consultants; and
- would the Leader share costs with other councils to ensure best value?

Councillor Darling

- spoke in support and was hopeful about plan for unitary; and
- residents of St Thomas often made contact regarding parking and other issues over which the Council had no control, how might a unitary help us to reform some of the parking legislation we currently have?

Councillor Parkhouse

Spoke in support and commented that Local government reorganisation meant change for everyone and there would be a move towards clarity and accountability for Exeter and surrounding areas.

Councillor Banyard

- England was overly centralised and there was a danger that this could shift power to large unitaries;
- decisions should be made at the most local level possible only referring on where necessary; and
- would the leader commit to town/parish councils across the whole area?

Councillor Wood

- Exeter had inspiring buildings and was the historic county capital with connections to its close neighbours;
- current city boundaries were dated and no longer fit for purpose, for example West Clyst and half of Monkerton were marketed as next to Exeter not Honiton
- Exeter was not a city in isolation but with a network of neighbouring communities; and
- he commended the report.

Councillor Haigh

- spoke in support with some trepidation regarding financial cost;
- given pressures on the budget it would be unreasonable to expect taxpayers to shoulder this cost;
- when the Council wrote formally it could request financial support for councils; and
- if the Government was serious about reorganisation it must be serious about funding it and ensuring the resources needed to carry out reorganisation were in place.

As seconder Councillor Wright made the following points in support of the recommendations:

- it was encouraging for Member and officers that there was support in the room but also encouraging to Exeter and surrounding area residents;
- Councillor took their roles seriously regardless of party; and

- the Council had tried to make the two-tier work but must change to help residents know who to approach and not have two political control centres.

The Chief Executive addressed questions from Members in the following terms:

- the City Council had a positive relationship with the Police and Crime Commissioner and it was assumed that this would continue;
- support for the cost of local government reorganisation from government was not available but civil servants had advised that the government may provide costs to support the implementation of any decisions made about which unitaries would be created;
- from December 2024 all districts had been meeting weekly or fortnightly with one meeting facilitated by the LGA with all leaders and Chief Executives. The meeting of the Devon Districts Forum, which usually met once a month, had voted for the remaining 7 districts with commonality to form a working group to take forward proposals and assumed that Exeter would be working alone. Joint work had been and remained the intention of this Council, however, following the decision of the other districts Exeter City Council commissioned our own support;
- some experts would be needed in areas such as social care and procurement processes would be followed; and
- the Council had hoped to share costs with other districts and would attempt to do so going forward.

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

- subsidiarity was very important;
- local organisations ran the swimming pool in Topsham;
- ward sizes may be approximately 4600 per councillor whereas two tier wards were currently 2200 and there maybe a loss of councillors carrying out some of the work;
- the meeting with other districts had become complex ;
- contact had continued with many of the other Devon leaders and intend to continue;
- he would put forward Councillor Mitchell's idea to have other party leaders involved in discussions;
- he would work to allay fears from Group Leaders and the public;
- there would be approximately 700 parish councils and the council would want to talk to them but given the number it would be unlikely to be all at once;
- the council were learning from the surveys undertaken and making improvements;
- the aim would be to ask communities and parishes how they saw themselves going forward and what they could do if they the powers proposed;
- a unitary authority would be strategic with some services devolved;
- there would be an aim to grow commitment in all parishes as not all performed to the same standard;
- there would be a portfolio holder for parishes and towns;
- he wanted a shared vision for Exeter;
- biodiversity was very important the 2030 aspiration remained;
- it was important that Exeter had a voice around the table with the Strategic Mayor;
- thanked other political leaders for putting Exeter and surrounding area before party politics; and

- must reach out to change culture and attitudes and people need to be heard, their not being heard would build internal fear, education was key and he assured Councillor Hughes of support in Exeter and that there was a will to reach out to other parts of the county.

The Leader of the Council called for a RECORDED/NAMED vote which received sufficient support.

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

RESOLVED that Council:-

1) approves the interim submission for local government reorganisation at Appendix A; and

2) supports the proposal to engage with a range of stakeholders, including Exeter's residents, residents in surrounding areas, businesses, key partners, other councils in Devon, in the development of a final business case for local government reorganisation due to be submitted in November 2025.

(The meeting commenced at 6.02 pm and closed at 8.12 pm)

Chair

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