

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Council held at Barum Room - Brynsworthy on Thursday, 9th January, 2025 at 6.30 pm

PRESENT: Members:

Councillor Walker (Chair)

Councillors Bell, Biederman, Bishop, Bushell, Cann, Clayton, Crabb, Haworth-Booth, Jones, D Knight, R Knight, Lane, C Leaver, P Leaver, Lethaby, Maddocks, Maskell, Milton, Norman, Orange, Patrinos, Prowse, Quinn, Roome, Topps, Turton, Whitehead, Wilkinson, Williams, Wilson, Worden and York

Officers:

Chief Executive, Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive and Senior Solicitor and Monitoring Officer

Also Present virtually:

Councillor Bulled

67. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Davies, Denton, Hunt, Josef, Lovering, Spear and Stevenson.

The Senior Corporate and Community Services Officer advised that Councillor Bulled would be attending the meeting virtually, however would not be able to vote.

68. BUSINESS BROUGHT FORWARD BY OR WITH THE CONSENT OF THE CHAIR

(a) Kev Phillips

The Chair advised Council that Kev Phillips who worked in the Waste and Recycling service had sadly passed away.

Council held a one minute silence in his memory.

(b) Member Satisfaction Survey

The Chair reminded Councillors to complete the Member Satisfaction Survey by Friday 10 January 2025, the results of which fed into the performance indicator

which is reported as part of the quarterly Performance and Financial Management report.

69. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Councillors declared an other registerable interest in item 5 on the agenda, as Devon County Councillors and had sought and been granted a dispensation pursuant to Section 33 of the Localism Act 2011 to continue to take part in the deliberation and vote on this item by the Governance committee on 7 January 2025:

Councillors Biederman, Crabb, Caroline Leaver, Maskell and Roome.

70. ENGLISH DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Council received a presentation by the Chief Executive regarding Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation.

He highlighted the following:

- English Devolution White Paper Proposals which was issued on 16 December 2024. The White Paper covered devolution, Local Government Review, standards, audit, workforce capacity and remote meetings. It was issued along with the National Planning Policy Framework, Funding statement and proposed changes to Planning Committees. Widespread reform.
- Devolution proposals which included: Combined Authorities which would be known as Strategic Authorities with the Devon and Torbay County Combined Authority becoming a Foundation Strategic Authority. Government's ambition was that all areas would be covered by Mayoral Strategic Authorities. New powers would be given to the Strategic Authorities and Government's wish was that devolution became the default.
- The criteria for Strategic Authorities and Deals which included: population of 1.5m+; sensible economic geographies; no devolution islands; geography must be capable of delivering key strategies; alignment with other public sector boundaries was an advantage; and a strong local identity.
- Powers included: existing Foundation Strategic Authorities would remain largely unchanged but with some additions; Mayoral Strategic Authorities would receive long term investment funding; Strategic development management; regeneration and housing delivery; culture, heritage and sport spending; skills; Green jobs and skills; net zero; and health improvement duty.
- Local Government Reorganisation – English Devolution White Paper Executive Summary stated: "Unitary councils can lead to better outcomes for residents, save significant money which can be reinvested in public services and improve accountability with fewer politicians who are more able to focus on delivering for residents". Evidence was based on PriceWaterhouseCoopers report for County Council Networks. It facilitated a programme of local government re-organisation for two-tier areas. There would be a phased approach but with all two tier areas being reorganised over this Parliament and the next. There was an expectation that new unitary

authorities would have at least 500k population. There was no other criteria known at this time. The expectation was that all councils in an area would work together to develop unitary proposals that were in the interests of the whole area. Government did not want competing proposals put forward. Transition was to be as swift as possible. Support would be provided by Government to facilitate the change including the postponement of elections where this helped smooth the transition.

- Letter from the Minister was received on 16 December 2024. It had been sent to all two tier Councils and neighbouring smaller unitaries. There would be a formal invite in January for unitary proposals from all Councils affected, with further detail to be set out on the criteria to be used. Interim plans were required to be submitted by March 2025, with final proposals submitted by May or October 2025. A Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) was for areas ready to come together and wishing to work to an accelerated timescale. Areas that wished to join the DPP could apply to postpone the May elections by 10 January 2025.
- District Councils could not object to a proposal to delay an election.
- A proposal to delay an election must be supported by the upper tier authorities that would form the new Strategic Authority.
- The anticipated “go live” dates for the new Local Government Re-organisation arrangements would be April 2027 and April 2028.
- Current position – Devon County Council (DCC) will ask for the postponement of elections in May 2025, putting devolution and Local Government Review on the priority programme. Their previous statement indicated that DCC would focus on a single unitary for Devon and Torbay (which had a population of 970,000). Devon County Council met today seeking the consent from the Government to postpone the county elections in May and to be put on the priority programme. In response to the statement issued by Devon County Council, the District Councils had issued a statement indicating that they do not support the postponement of elections or the creation of a Devon and Torbay wide unitary authority, although the District Councils had not met at that stage. Plymouth City Council met today and resolved to support the creation of the Devon, Cornwall, Plymouth and Torbay Strategic Authority and support mayoral arrangements and also suggested in terms of Local Government Review that the boundaries be extended to allow for growth. Torridge, Teignbridge, East Devon District Councils and Exeter City Council were due to meet this evening. Mid Devon District Council met last night and West Devon met on 6 January 2025. Districts are trying to get together a joint letter based on the joint statement not supporting the postponement of the elections or the creation of a Devon and Torbay wide unitary. Exeter City Council’s report suggested that they will be submitting a letter looking for an Exeter centric unitary to be created and alluded to the fact of the extension of Exeter’s boundary as part of that.
- It was recommended that North Devon Council write to Government indicating: support for devolution generally; opposition to the postponement of County elections; opposition to the creation of a single Devon/Torbay unitary; and support for working with other councils and partners on suitable and locally acceptable proposals for unitary status.

- The reasons for the recommendation were as follows: greater power held locally is to be welcomed; postponing elections should only be carried out in exceptional circumstances as it denies the public of a democratic right and in this case there is no urgency to agree a devolution deal, or exceptional circumstances, as a deal has only recently been agreed for Devon and Torbay. Similarly there is no clear plan for re-organisation that relies on a postponement to be delivered; a unitary authority of 970,000 is too large to be in the best interests of the whole area; a much better plan for unitary governance can be achieved by all councils in Devon and Torbay working together at pace but with proper consultation with partners and the public and with proper consideration of the complex geographies within the area; given the time and the opportunity, that plan can properly provide for local accountability, community partnership and involvement, financial resilience and can provide the opportunity for service transformation and improvement.

Following the presentation, there then followed a question and answer session.

In response to questions, the Chief Executive advised the following:

- Awaiting confirmation from Government regarding the criteria for the Strategic and Unitary Authorities.
- Devon County Council had resolved to seek the consent from the Government to postpone the county elections in May and to be put on the priority programme.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government would not take into consideration the views of District Councils on the postponement of elections. There had been no indication from the Government that the views put forward by District Councils would not be heard in relation to Local Government Review.
- Strategic Authorities would be given powers under the devolution arrangements. Local Government Review would take place for those Authorities beneath Strategic Authorities. If the Government agreed to postpone the elections, it was expected that the Mayoral Elections would take place in April 2026 and full implementation would take place in April 2027. Clarification would be included within the letter that the Government would send to the Council.

Following the suggestion of an amendment from Councillor Bell “that when it comes to the next local elections for Unitary Authorities that these tie in with the Parish and Town Councils”, the Chief Executive advised that dates for elections would be included in the order setting out the election process and that there would be opportunities for the Council to make representations.

It was moved by Councillor Bushell and seconded by Councillor Biederman “that the recommendations be adopted and that a small working group of Councillors be set up to look at firming up North Devon Council’s suggestions as to the make-up of a future unitary authority”.

The Chief Executive advised that the setting up a working group did not need to be included within the notice of motion.

It was agreed by Councillors Bushell and Biederman that the wording “that a small working group of Councillors be set up to look at firming up North Devon Council’s suggestions as to the make-up of a future unitary authority” be removed from the motion.

Councillor Clayton advised that a small working group of Councillors would be set up to look at firming up the Council’s suggestions as to the make-up of a future unitary authority.

It was moved by Councillor C. Leaver and duly seconded that the vote be taken by a recorded vote.

RESOLVED that the vote be taken by a recorded vote.

RESOLVED that North Devon Council write to Government indicating:

- (a) support for devolution generally,
- (b) opposition to the postponement of County elections,
- (c) opposition to the creation of a single Devon/Torbay unitary and
- (d) support for working with other councils and partners on suitable and locally acceptable proposals for unitary status.

Voting for the motion:

Councillors Bell, Biederman, Bishop, Bushell, Cann, Clayton, Haworth-Booth, Jones, D. Knight, R. Knight, Lane, C. Leaver, P. Leaver, Lethaby, Maddocks, Milton, Norman, Orange, Patrinos, Prowse, Quinn, Roome, Topps, Turton, Walker, Whitehead, Wilkinson, Williams, Wilson, Worden and York.

Voting against the motion:

None.

Abstained from voting:

Councillors Crabb and Maskell.

Totals: 31 For, 0 Against and 2 Abstained.

Chair

The meeting ended at 8.09 pm

NOTE: These minutes will be confirmed as a correct record at the next meeting of the Committee.