

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **COUNCIL** held on 8 January 2025 at 6.00 pm

Present

Councillors

G Czapiewski (Chair)
C Adcock, M D Binks, D Broom,
E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, J Cairney,
S J Clist, L J Cruwys, G Cochran, C Connor,
J M Downes, M Farrell, M Fletcher,
A Glover, C Harrower, B Holdman,
M Jenkins, S Keable, L Knight, J Lock,
J Poynton, R Roberts, A Stirling, L Taylor,
H Tuffin, G Westcott, A White, J Wright and
D Wulff

Apologies

Councillors

F W Letch, N Bradshaw (online), S Chenore (online),
F J Colthorpe (online), A Cuddy, G Duchesne (online),
B Fish, R Gilmour, L G J Kennedy (online), N Letch,
S Robinson and N Woollatt (online)

Also Present

Officer(s):

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy
Chief Executive (S151)), Maria De Leiburne (Director of
Legal, People & Governance (Monitoring Officer)) Laura
Woon (Democratic Services Manager) and Angie Howell
(Democratic Services Officers)

267 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors:

N Bradshaw (online), S Chenore (online), P Colthorpe (online), A Cuddy, G
DuChesne (online), B Fish, R Gilmour, L J Kennedy (online), F Letch, N Letch,
S Robinson and N Woollatt (online).

268 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Members were reminded of the need to declare any interests when appropriate.

None were declared under this item.

269 MEETING MANAGEMENT

The Chair advised Council Members that he would add Public Question Time before the next agenda item using his constitutional discretion as Chair.

He reminded members of the public that their questions and or statement should be specifically in relation to the sole item of business contained in this Extraordinary Council meeting.

270 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Goff Welchman

The Council should be celebrating today, as he believed he was once on the same side of the fence as all of the Members.

Angela Rayner's ghastly devolution proposals were anything but that pure stalinism in all but name, right down to sending in Government apparatchiks to take control, if things did not go according to their dogma.

One of the strongest pillars of Local Government democracy was the right of taxpayers, like him, to physically attend Council meetings, and ask public questions concerning all matters of Council business, while face-to-face with Officers and the Councillors they elected to office.

He realises that this administration, in spite of its claims for openness and transparency, had done its best to make that more difficult, restricting challenges to responses, and would have made it even more difficult, had it not been for strong opposition by members of the public at specific meetings. However, at the moment still had that right.

Members of the public could easily get to this Councils local meetings, park free of charge nearby, have their say, and get home quickly again afterwards. Under Komrad Rayner's plan, their Local Government headquarters would be many miles away, probably in a city centre with difficult rush-hour access, and limited parking at exorbitant prices. Public attendance and interrogation would become impractical for all but those living close by.

This was probably their desired aim. They intend to ride rough-shod over any local opposition to their schemes.

Question 1:

Would this Council vigorously oppose the devolution proposals?

Question 2:

If the answer to question one was yes, would the objections specifically mention the points concerning public questions, in person, face-to-face, being a crucial element of our democracy?

Question 3:

If the answer to question one was no, why not?"

The Chair advised that the questions would be answered as part of the debate at the next item on the agenda.

271 ENGLISH DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER

The Council had before it a report from the Leader of the Council on the latest situation with regards to the devolution and reorganisation debates as instigated by the English Devolution White Paper and Minister's letter to the Leader prior to Christmas.

The Leader of the Council outlined the contents of the report on the Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation.

- His report was self-explanatory and outlined the position shared by all District Councils in Devon but there were some points he wished to clarify after the last Full Council meeting in December 2024.
- To be clear he was not against change, nor against genuine devolution and bringing more money and powers to important parts of the Country.
- Some Members may know that he had a fulltime job as a Continuous Improvement Manager, and part of that involved improving services and delivering substantial savings to his employer. He oversees delivering transformative change every day. So, he understood all too well that this was not an easy task, with every project requiring substantial planning, consultation, and evidence before acting.
- The Leader believed that the Government White Paper set out a policy of a compulsory move to a unitary authority.
- The Leader believed that if this Council did not get on the fast track to unitary, they would not be 'left behind' as had been claimed. This was because this Council was already well on the way to meaningful devolution, due to start delivering in just five weeks' time.
- The County administration were running scared of facing the public after years of mismanagement and a disastrous set of election results last year – 100% yes. In private, so do they.
- Councils who were being considered for the first stage were areas which had already looked at and considered devolution. Those were areas where there was joined up cooperation and working between Districts and County and where there were already consideration of the makeup of a new Unitary area. Those were areas that were already on their path to regional devolution and had established plans for reorganisation.
- Devon County Council had done nothing and there was no plan or joined up thinking.
- Today Devon County Council published their report and recommendations for their Extraordinary Council meeting to take place on Thursday 9 January 2025. It also contained nothing. It was made to be clear they intended the Governments wished to see Labour regional Mayors as a means to delay elections and disenfranchise 1 million residents of our County to suit their political goals, not democratic ones. It was damning that you could replace the word Devon in the entire report and it could apply to any County Council anywhere in England. There were no details on how any of the "*plans*" could be delivered, because there were no plans.
- He quoted from the report of Devon County Council "it was noted also that the Council was not committing to any specific form of reorganisation, but it had a

very tight timetable to work with other authorities to put forward meaningful proposals for the area. Past reorganisations across the Country had demonstrated that this would require significant focus for all Officers, Councillors, and resources. There was a significant amount of work to do to prepare proposals for reorganisation and for deeper devolution arrangements if the timeframes set by Government for the priority programme are to be met.” This was ridiculous and premature to be pulling the trigger on postponing democracy when to borrow from American politics– there was not even a concept of a plan.

- Councillors, for what reason the County Council would wish to be on the first phase, was it to get a better deal for residents, was it to rush through clear thought out proposals, or was it that this Council would be left behind? No, it was not any of those. As it stated in his report, all areas would be required to come up with proposals for devolution by the autumn. All of the Councils across Devon had already carried out work on Devolution with the County Combined Area, and all the Districts were clear that they knew that further change was coming and had set out a clear, effective, and democratic process to achieve this, even with Exeter City where initial thoughts on the shape that may take differ widely.
- There was no requirement to go ahead now without proper consultation work, working together and actually considering the Council’s residents at this point. It stated in the County report that they would work closely with District Councils, he had not received nothing from the Leader of Devon County – not a telephone call, not an email, nothing! Did that demonstrate working closely?
- The County administration were sending their Councillors around to their Parish Councils with a crib sheet of “we need to do this now; we need to get ahead of the curve; and using the fear of the Labour Government imposing their will upon us.” All of those were demonstrably false pretexts. The Government had made it clear in their White paper; it was clear in communications with Leaders and Chief Executives; and it was clear through the Civil service meetings: Devon was not being considered for the first phase. This Council were already on the path to devolution that built on a proven track record of collaborative working in the interests of the people, the businesses, the tourists, the economy, and environmental stewardship of Devon.

Councillors, the Leader urged to send a clear message to County and the Government by supporting the recommendations in front of them. They would deliver a democratic mandate to support further devolution only after considered, robust, and non-political proposals were developed. The Council were not against ambition nor genuine devolution. This Council supported to work closely with their colleagues across Devon’s County, District, City and Unitary Councils to get the best deal for their residents with proper consultation, proper proposals and joined up thinking and already doing this. As a Council we should build on the many strengths to build a plan that was best for Devon.

Consideration was given to:

- Local Government was an unusual patchwork of governance models frequently misunderstood by electors as it was confusing and politically divisive with no coordination of governance boundaries. An ‘electorate’ muddle in need of reform.

- Combined authorities would begin to address this. However, that process must not be secretive using the power structures behind closed doors but should be democratically and inclusive.
- Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, in the week before Christmas, announced the Government's desire to create new local Councils of around 500,000 people. The population of Devon, was around 1 million people. Opportunities within the White Paper, published on 16 December 2024, had now resulted in a power grab at the local level by both Conservative (County) and Labour (City).
- This morning Devon County Council published their report that would consider and then make a decision some 24-hours later for their meeting tomorrow. Sole purpose: to beat Ms Rayners deadline of January 10, shock and awe as a 'Trumpian' land & power grab.
- Effectively, the dominant Conservative Party on Devon County Council would use their majority tomorrow to tear-up the September agreement by Government with all Devon local authorities for the formation of a Foundation Strategic Authority for Devon & Torbay, as Combined County Authority (CCA). This CCA would, and still could, provide a transitional period for all the Councils in Devon to continue to work together and agree reform for implementation after the next General Election. This would provide time for discussion, consultation, and orderly transition.
- Instead the County Council Leader James McInnis betrayed all the 8 Council Leaders on a deal that he and his predecessor had been working closely with over the last 2 years. On top of this the proposed scrapping of the County Council May elections. Who did he fear most? Division within the Conservative ranks with Reform or the strength and competence of the Liberal Democrats who secured 42% of all Devon Councillors seats in the May 2023 local elections, and who deliver services with responsibility that are secure and stable.
- Tonight this Council could do little more than support the recommendations and supported by all other District Councils in Devon. The County Council would make their decision tomorrow and would submit for the deadline of Friday 10 January, and likely as not the Minister would make a decision by the end of this month.
- Different levels of democracy would reduce financial efficiency, unitary authorities could led to better outcomes for Devon's residents and save significant amount of money that could be reinvested into public services, improve accountability with fewer politicians that would have the ability to focus on delivery services for residents.
- Investments levels in the South West were amongst the lowest in England.
- The average Mid Devon District Councillor had virtually no power at all, the present Liberal Democrat promised the removal of the Cabinet system which removed authority and accountability from ward Councillor what happened to that?
- In 2024 polling found that 69% of people thought that public services were worse.
- As a local Councillor, when visiting Parish Councillors and in the minority of two on this Council this evening, with no power to do anything.
- The White Paper did not mention funding which was central to the problems. It mentioned transfer of power did that mean money out of Whitehall into the regions?

- 61% of England was covered from devolution deals, but 46% of Southern England was in that situation.
- The Government expected effective levels of collaboration to be demonstrated between constituent Members and District Councils, especially where the District Council covered the primary city or economy in that County. Tiverton sadly was not one of those but Exeter City Council may well be considered to be that.
- Should this Council consider Mayoral Strategic Authorities, Strategic Authorities or a combined County Authorities?
- Discussion about this Council becoming either
Combined County Authorities including all of Devon and Cornwall.
Amalgamation of Devon and Torbay.
Enhanced Exeter and District with a population over 600k including Tiverton, Cullompton, Crediton, Honiton, Exmouth, Sidmouth, Tedburn St Mary and those that commute between those towns and Exeter.
Metropolitan District including Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter and surrounding commuting areas.
- Devon County Council would have an influence over the final decision and the decision would be a political decision by the Labour decision.
- Better value for money for the people the Councillors represent.
- That the Leader had misjudged the issue and may be accused by self-interest.
- The White Paper was clear in the establishing of new unitary authorities under accountable and electable Mayors.
- The challenges were clear and how the Council responded to the White Paper, did we wait for the change to be imposed by others or engage with all parties to seek, construct and deliver an organisation for those living in this County, more effective, less costly and greater authority dealing with Central Government.
- The National Government would be the one that would make the discussion on postponing the election.
- All Councillors to come together to present a clear and ambitious vision, much to offer with a talented and successful team and deliver strategy that rises above political interests.
- District Councillors had an extremely valuable role. Increased collaboration and consultation was the best way this would provide better value to the residents.
- Sussex, East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton Hove proposal to join as one authority governing 1.7 million people, how much debate as a Councillor would you get at that size?
- Why cancel the election whilst the debate continued on devolution. When would they hold another election, in 1 year or 2 years?
- Angela Rayner stated “there would be no impact on Local services”. Years would be spent talking about reorganisation, therefore these years needed to focus on delivering core services to local people. There was time to consider all proposals, elections to take place in May and time for proper and informed debate.
- This Council was passionate about planning as this was a core element of District Council. How would those decisions take place if this Council went unitary?
- Endorsed the joint statement, within regards to recommendation four of the statement clarification on this and how much it would cost.

- The Cabinet Member for Governance, Finance, and Risk, stated he was not present at the meeting with just a title but with a duty. A duty to protect this Council, their services, and most importantly, the people that we served and their right to democracy.
- Good governance was a foundation of trust in democracy. The Leader's recommendations rightly demand transparency, no secret deals, and no rushed decisions. They demanded accountability, every penny accounted for, every risk considered. And they demanded consultation and a real, meaningful conversation with the people who would live with the consequences of those changes.
- The financial promises before. "Efficiency savings!" they said. "Streamlined services!" they said, "Value for Money!" they said. But look at Somerset, look at Dorset. Costs soared, savings vanished, and frontline services suffered and continue to suffer.
- We must not let Mid Devon become another cautionary tale. The Leader's recommendations demanded independent financial analysis. No sugar-coating. No smoke and mirrors. No Tory rhetoric, Just facts.
- Change of this scale, of this magnitude, must not be imposed from above. It must be chosen by the people it affected. That was why a Devon-wide referendum must be part of any serious proposal.
- The Council could, and must, continue to collaborate with Councils across Devon, including Torbay. But collaboration would not mean rolling over. It means standing firm on principles.
- Councillors had a responsibility here. A responsibility to ensure that any decision about the future of local government in Devon was made with clear evidence, financial scrutiny, democratic legitimacy and the best interests of residents at its core.
- So let us stand together. Let us send a message to the Government, to Devon County Council, and to anyone else watching: this Council would not be rushed or ignored. And it would not allow our communities to be treated as pawns in a political game.

Cllr G Westcott **MOVED** an **AMENDMENT** and seconded by Cllr S Keable.

To add a sixth recommendation as follows:

In proposals for new regional and unitary local authorities, to advocate for a proportional voting system in order to move fairly to reflect the preferences and views of the electorate and to enable every vote to count.

Upon a vote being taken, the **AMENDMENT** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

Those voting **AGAINST**: Councillors M Binks, J Poynton and R Roberts.

Cllr M Binks **PROPOSED** to vote separately on the recommendations within the report.

The Leader **MOVED** and seconded by Cllr S Clist:

1. To write to the Minister in partnership with other Council Leaders to reaffirm the Council's opposition to a single Devon-wide unitary authority and the postponement of County Council elections.

Upon a vote being taken, the **MOTION** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

2. Fully endorse the Joint Statement issued by Devon's District Councils (3rd January 2025), emphasising the Council's opposition to a single unitary authority; the importance of proper consultation and evidence-based reform; and a clear stance against delaying scheduled elections.

Upon a vote being taken, the **MOTION** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

3. To continue to work collaboratively with councils across Devon, including Torbay, to explore options for simplification as outlined in the English Devolution White Paper, with a focus on improving collaboration, efficiency, and shared services, rather than pursuing disruptive structural reforms.

Upon a vote being taken, the **MOTION** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

4. To commission legal advice and independent, evidence-based analysis to underpin any future proposals, ensuring they were credible, transparent, and robust to ensure the Ministerial deadlines were met with well-prepared, fact-driven, and scrutinised submissions.

Upon a vote being taken, the **MOTION** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

Those voting **AGAINST**: Councillors M Binks and R Roberts.

5. To commit to comprehensive public consultation in advance of any business case submission, and to lobby the Government on the importance of a Devon-wide referendum to ensure that any revised local government structures met the principles of devolved powers to local communities rather than being imposed by Whitehall.

Upon a vote being taken, the **MOTION** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

Those **ABSTAINING** from voting: Councillors M Binks, R Roberts and A Stirling.

6. In proposals for new regional and unitary local authorities, to advocate for a proportional voting system in order to move fairly to reflect the preferences and views of the electorate and to enable every vote to count.

Upon a vote being taken, the **MOTION** was declared to have been **CARRIED**.

Those voting **AGAINST**: Councillors M Binks, J Poynton and R Roberts.

(The meeting ended at 19.26pm)

CHAIR