

**MINUTES** of an **EXTRAORDINARY MEETING** of the **COUNCIL** held on 12 March 2025 at 6.00pm

**Present**

**Councillors**

G Czapiewski (Vice-Chair), C Adcock, D Broom, E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, J Cairney, S J Clist, L J Cruwys, G Cochran, C Connor, F J Colthorpe, A Cuddy, G Duchesne, M Farrell, B Fish, M Fletcher, A Glover, C Harrower, B Holdman, M Jenkins, S Keable, L G J Kennedy, L Knight, J Lock, J Poynton, R Roberts, S Robinson, A Stirling, H Tuffin, G Westcott, J Wright and D Wulff

**Apologies**

**Councillors**

F W Letch, M D Binks, R Gilmour, N Letch and L Taylor

**Also Present**

**Officers**

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)) and Maria De Leiburne (Director of Legal, People & Governance (Monitoring Officer)), Angie Howell (Democratic Services Officer), David Parker (Democratic Services and Policy Research Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

**Councillors**

**Online**

N Bradshaw, S Chenore, J M Downes, N Woollatt and A White

**Officer Online**

Richard Marsh

291 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors: M Binks, R Gilmour, F Letch, N Letch and L Taylor.

292 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

The Chair reminded those present that all Members of the Council had been granted a dispensation to allow them to speak and vote in any debate on any matter that related to devolution or Local Government reorganisation in Devon.

## 293 MEETING MANAGEMENT

The Chair advised Council Members that he would allow 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 statements should be specifically in relation to the sole item of business contained in this Extraordinary Council meeting.

## 294 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

### **Honorary Alderman Mel Lucas**

Thank you for allowing me to have a few moments of your time this evening.

You will be far more privy than I as to what you have in front of you tonight and what you're going to discuss and how you're going to discuss this in your decision. Can I, as a member of the public, an ex Member of this particular Council and a Parish Councillor for over 26 years combined, put my thoughts to you.

I must express my opinions as I have always done in the past. We live, or so I am led to believe in the democracy. Over the last few weeks, we have seen many scenes that we have no longer any right to call democratic in any shape or form and the present organisation in Westminster is trying to do the same thing with this.

I believe fervently in democracy and that is why I served my community for as long as I did without any thought of monetary or any other type of reward. I just served them because I wanted to serve them and I hope all you Councillors feel the same as I do.

What is in front of you today takes away that right, it will take away your right to listen to the people whom you represent and who have given you the right to ask questions on their behalf. Some of those people will not do what I'm doing this evening because they don't have the courage to do it. Councillors, you know that you represent the people who put you where you are today. Those people look upon you as the conduit between them, the Parish Council and Mid Devon, who then in turn look towards the County Council. I would hope that after I've spoken you'll see where I come from in the context that I am fearful that this is yet another little chip away of the democracy that we so dearly love.

I love it fervently.

I would have no hesitation in telling you now that if push came to shove, then I would be pushing for all my worth to make sure that my people, whom I represented, are still going to be heard.

Mid Devon District Council is peculiar in the fact that it was sprung from a borough. We then became a District Council and it was well worth it. We made mistakes. We are human. We have made errors in the past. We learn hopefully from those errors. If this is allowed to go through without any fight, then we are letting our people who are our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues at work, or whomever, we are letting them down, we need you to still be here next year, the year after and the year after

that, because in all seriousness, the gap between the little people and the people in power is growing day by day, and if we don't make a decision now, to save local democracy, then all I can say councillors is that you may have let your people down.

Thank you most sincerely for letting me have my say as to how I feel about this because Mid Devon District Council, for all its warts, for all its faults, is exactly what we need and want and require and if you can take that message to the people who are supposedly looking after the little people, that is, those people who are at the bottom of everything, then please do so because I would fight side by side with you for the honour of making sure that Mid Devon District Council continues to do its work in the future, no matter what some of the outcome may be. Thank you, Chair.

## 295 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN DEVON (00:15:00)**

The Council had before it background information and recommendations in relation to Local Government Reorganisation in Devon.

The Leader, who had been unable to attend the meeting in person due to work commitments, had asked the Cabinet Member for Housing and Property Services and Deputy Leader to read out a statement on his behalf:

“Councillors, firstly, my apologies for not being with you this evening at another Extraordinary Council meeting to discuss Local Government Reorganisation.

I leave you tonight in the very capable hands of my two deputies, Councillor Jane Lock and Councillor Simon Clist. Since the announcement by central government in December, things have been moving at speed with the number of meetings I am attending with other local leaders of the Devon District's, City, Unitary and County Council stacking up.

I want to make it quite clear from the outset that I do not support the move towards unitary and firmly believe that it will impact our resident's representation and heap heavy responsibility on Councillors. For example currently our individual Councillors represent areas of around 1600 electors and county councillors, around 11,000. Under the reorganisation, one Councillor will represent an area of approximately 5000 electors. That may not seem too bad from the outset, but as a Councillor you will have to deal with issues that you currently face, including social housing, waste collections our vital leisure services, planning applications, licencing and much much more. However, you will also have to deal with issues around the state of our roads, schools, special educational needs, adult social care, public transport and again much much more.

5000 electors might not seem too bad in urban areas and large towns, but how does that impact our rural areas, of which most of Mid Devon is? Let me put this into perspective. That would be one Councillor covering my own ward of Bradninch, Silverton and Cadbury plus all the small hamlets and communities in between. Each with their own individual needs and issues. This will spell the end of local representation, the Councillor you speak to in the street daily or at local events, at the church, or even down at the local pub.

I have prided myself on being a Councillor with a young family and a full time job. Yes, I'm very busy but I can still be a local Councillor. This administration has made

the Council more family friendly with more evening meetings than ever before, and this allows the Council to be far more representative of the residents we serve. Being a local representative should not just be for the retired, self-employed, or the wealthy - it should be a range of individuals and backgrounds. Under a unitary regime it will be daytime meetings and lengthy travelling to meetings. It will also be difficult for the public to attend meetings which is of course a vital part of democracy.

Despite our objections to reorganisation, the current Government have their own ideas and have insisted that initial plans should be put forward by the 21st of March, with more robust plans in place by the 28th of November.

I've already made the case for local representation and firmly believe that a county wide unitary will not serve our residents in the best way. Leaders from across the Districts in Devon have agreed on a more sensible option of splitting Devon, as per the report in front of you. It is still a big area and not ideal, but it does serve our residents better than any other options I have seen.

This is in line with the government's requirements and ensures that the Council is not too big. Just imagine a county wide unitary with over 200 councillors, especially when a roll call is required.

I ask you to support the report and the recommendations tonight as we look to make the best case for our residents supporting the individuality of Mid Devon and call upon the County to support the proposal that has almost all of Devon Council's in agreement."

The Cabinet Member for People, Development and Deputy Leader also provided a statement:

"The Leader asked me to put forward some reflections on our close neighbour's journey to unitary in comparison with Devon.

As many of you know, I previously sat on Somerset County Council and was involved in the run up to going unitary. South Somerset District Council held a referendum and residents were overwhelmingly against the change. However, neither the County Council nor the Government of the time took any notice.

The District Councils in Somerset were financially sound and provided good local services. The County Council were not. Only savage cuts, delivered through an Extraordinary Council meeting, postponed a section 114 notice.

For all their talk of a balanced budget, Devon County Council hovers on the brink of bankruptcy. Their reserves are depleted. Children's Services, including SEND provision and the rising cost of delivering Adult Social Care are driving them further into crisis and I fear for the future of our discretionary services currently available to our communities.

When reorganisation took place in Somerset County, finances were a mess. This year, Government have given permission for a one off Council Tax rise of 7.5%, which will help them through this year but is nowhere near enough to address the now £200 million lost through freezing Council Tax for seven years.

A larger county wide unitary will put huge pressure on services, and whilst Government clearly intends to force Devon down the unitary route, we must proceed with the best of intentions and continue to serve the 80,000 Mid Devon residents who depend on us in the best way we can and work towards decisions that give our area the best opportunity of retaining its individuality. I urge you to support the recommendations tonight as we move forward in partnership with our neighbouring Councils. Thank you.”

The Chair then reiterated the 6 recommendations that were before Council.

That Council:

1. Notes the importance of keeping the public informed on this process that central government has mandated of us.
2. Recognises the excellent collaboration across most of the councils in Devon and hopes that this spirit continues over the coming months with a view to effective partnership working and sharing the resource requirements of developing the full proposal.
3. Ensures that meaningful and substantial public engagement and consultation takes place before the submission of any proposal in November.
4. Supports the submission to government of an initial plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> March deadline outlining the current proposal, which would potentially see an enlarged Plymouth City area with the remaining county geography split in two – achieving the government’s requirement of serving approximately 500k population in these two new areas. Such a proposal would see Devon’s existing 11 councils reduced to 3; reported locally as the 1,5,4 proposal.
5. Tasks the Leader and Chief Executive with ensuring the best possible submission is presented to government and that any revisions or amendments continue to reflect the districts’ best interests; and
6. Writes immediately to Devon County Council to request that they consider submitting this majority-supported proposal as one of the options they intend to look at in future, seeking to work with the new administration after May’s elections to achieve better alignment between the efforts of all councils in Devon as we work up full and final proposals.

Cllr G Westcott **MOVED** an **AMENDMENT** which was seconded by Cllr H Tuffin:

To amend recommendation number 4 to read as follows:

That Council supports the submission to government of an initial plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> March deadline; the submission to emphasize and reflect the importance of geography, and of access and accountability, for the appropriate population size of new authorities in rural areas with sparse settlement; recognizing that for cost-efficiency and effectiveness, the appropriate population size will be considerably smaller in such areas than in those of dense or urban settlements.

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

Discussion continued regarding:

- The importance of learning lessons from elsewhere.
- The need to fight for the best outcome for Mid Devon residents.
- The need for a review of local authorities was overdue but not at the cost of less representation.
- The process had been dictated by Westminster. Collectively the Devon authorities would need to invest up to £50m to support reorganisation. Add to that, the disruption and rising costs which would all lead to a weaker democracy. Communities would be left feeling lost and alone. Where would there be meaningful engagement at a local level in the future? This was 'restructuring by force' with decisions already having been made. However, there was a need to be realistic, the Council needed to fight for the best possible outcome based on evidence, transparency and available democracy. Doing nothing would leave local communities voiceless.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Property Services and Deputy Leader **MOVED**, seconded by the Cabinet Member for People, Development and Deputy Leader that the six recommendations before Council be supported.

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

(The meeting ended at 6.47 pm)

**CHAIR**