

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **COUNCIL** held on 26 November 2025 at 6.00 pm

**Present
Councillors**

G Czapiewski, C Adcock, M D Binks,
E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, J Cairney,
S Chenore, S J Clist, G Cochran, C Connor,
F J Colthorpe, G Duchesne, J M Downes,
M Farrell, B Fish, M Fletcher, A Glover,
C Harrower, B Holdman, S Keable, L Knight,
J Lock, J Poynton, R Roberts, S Robinson,
T Stanford, A Stirling, M Stratton, L Taylor,
H Tuffin, G Westcott, J Wright and D Wulff

**Apologies
Councillors**

N Bradshaw (online), D Broom, L J Cruwys, M Jenkins,
N Letch and A White and N Woollatt (online)

**Also Present
Officer(s):**

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

62 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors: N Bradshaw (online), D Broom, L J Cruwys, M Jenkins, N Letch and A White and N Woollatt (online).

63 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.

The Director for Legal, People and Governance (Monitoring Officer) stated the following:

- Members were reminded that under the Localism Act 2011, councillors may express views or campaign on issues without automatically being deemed to have predetermined their position. However, it was essential that all Members

approached this matter with an open mind and were ready to consider all relevant information and debate before voting.

- In relation to allowances received from another authority involved in the reorganisation, which could constitute a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest (DPI), there was a dispensation to allow participation. However, Members were reminded that the dispensation did not override the legal requirement to avoid bias or predetermination.

64 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

None received.

65 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION SUBMISSION

The Council had before it a *report from the Leader of the Council on the full Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) submission document and to discuss any issues that arise. The report was presented to ensure that the Council responded to the invitation to submit proposals for a single tier of local government and continued to influence future LGR in Devon.

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

- His report was self-explanatory and outlined local government reorganisation in Devon and the shared vision of 'Reimagining Devon'.
- The process began following the publication of the Government's White Paper in December 2024, which required councils to explore creating a single tier of local government for areas of approximately 500,000 people, aiming to demonstrate value for money, community cohesion and improved service delivery.
- From early 2025, the Leader and other district leaders, along with Torbay unitary authority, worked intensively to respond to this directive. Over the past year, they collaborated to develop the "4-5-1 model," excluding Exeter (which pursued its own proposal) and Torbay (which ultimately focused on a Torbay-first model). He noted that this was a pragmatic response to national pressure rather than a locally initiated process.
- Concerns were raised about democracy and local representation, particularly regarding the government's insistence that any proposal must not exceed 100 councillors. He highlighted that Mid Devon currently had 42 District Councillors including a further 5 that were County Councillors and even under the 4-5-1 proposal, representation would be reduced by two-thirds, risking a democratic deficit and weakening local accountability.
- The Leader stated that Mid Devon residents valued local decision-making and direct representation, and any reorganisation must protect that link. The past year had been challenging, with disagreements and national agendas dominating, but this council engaged constructively and collaborated with neighbouring districts while maintaining local values.
- He acknowledged the significant impact on staff and expressed gratitude for their work, as well as thanking Councillor Wulff for preparing printed copies of the 'Reimagining Devon' document. He urged Members to consider the 4-5-1 proposal with an open mind, noting that while the reform was not sought, it met government criteria and could shape Devon for the next 50 years. He

concluded by calling for continued collaboration across councils and reaffirmed the commitment to championing Mid Devon's communities, services and democracy. The Leader indicated that recommendations would be moved after discussion and debate.

The Deputy Leader highlighted the following:

- He had attended several meetings on behalf of the Leader and stated that cooperation between districts had been exemplary. It was noted that although councils had not chosen this position, they had all worked purposefully to shape a proposal reflecting Devon's diverse needs. He shared concerns about democracy and representation, highlighting that the current breadth of councillors' backgrounds was a strength that could be lost under a large unitary authority. Such a move could make it harder for people from ordinary working backgrounds to stand, risking a shift towards career politicians.
- He emphasised that decision-making should remain close to communities and stated that the 4-5-1 proposal achieved this balance while meeting ministerial criteria.
- The proposal was described as a forward-looking vision and a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve services and preserve democratic accountability. He concluded by expressing support for a future that reflected local identity and ambitions and confirmed he would listen with interest to the discussion.

Consideration was given to:

- Clarification on the purpose of the meeting, noting that the Leader's statement had caused some confusion. The two recommendations in the paper were briefly discussed. These were:
 - That Council note the report and the LGR submission document.
 - That Council endorse the submission as being in accordance with previous Council decisions to develop its reorganisation proposal.
- Concerns were expressed that the Leader had suggested the need 'to support' the proposal this evening, which was not explicitly stated in the recommendations. It was explained that it would be up to the Leader to move the recommendations, but the recommendations stood as written. In response to the query, it was clarified that voting on Recommendation 2 did not constitute express support for the proposal; rather, it endorsed the submission as being in accordance with previous Council decisions.
- Appreciation for the work undertaken to develop the proposal, acknowledging that it was not a choice of the Council but a response to imposed criteria. Concerns were also raised on the long travel times particularly in summer which could discourage councillors with full-time jobs from participating. It was noted that while the proposal aimed at cost savings, it could impose greater financial and personal costs on councillors and potentially residents. It was explained that the Leader sympathised with the concerns of travel and that the Standards Committee had responded to the Government Consultation enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at Council meetings. The Council were now awaiting a White Paper to introduce voting rights for those online at meetings.

- Clarification on neighbourhood area committees referenced in the document, specifically what decisions these committees would make and what role communities would have in designing them? It was explained that any decision-making powers for neighbourhood area committees would need to be delegated by the new unitary council. The proposal suggested that decisions most relevant to local areas such as local planning management and licensing could be handled by these committees. However, it was noted that it was unrealistic to expect neighbourhood area committees to assume all functions previously held by district councils.
- The Leader's request to keep an open mind on the quality of the 4-5-1 proposal was acknowledged, while noting disagreement with some aspects. The 4-5-1 model was only one of several proposals to be considered by Government, including Devon County Council's "9-1-1" model and other submissions from Torbay, Exeter, and Plymouth. Concerns were raised that none of the proposals might fully meet the six criteria set out in the December 2024 White Paper, and that approach could lead Government to impose its own solution. The worry that the 4-5-1 model appeared oversold, lacked acknowledgment of negative impacts, and could undermine community engagement particularly for areas falling between proposed boundaries was expressed. The importance of community hubs was highlighted as fundamental to maintaining local voice and influence. Which of the representations was most likely to satisfy the Government's six criteria? It was noted that different proposals could place areas such as Crediton and Yeo under different councils, depending on which bids were accepted. The Government would ultimately decide the outcome. Members expressed a preference for a referendum, although this was not within the Council's control. Council's would naturally prioritise their own interests, making agreement difficult, and examples were cited from other regions where multiple proposals were submitted but the Government ultimately chose its preferred option following consultation.
- This was merely the end of the beginning. The Council had a long way to go once the Government make their decision and that could take a while. That was when the negotiations would start as to how the new unitary authority would actually be created and formed.
- It was felt the document contained oversimplifications and marketing language, such as claims of a "safe and seamless transition" and "quick financial payback", which overlooked major complexities. It was highlighted issues such as boundary overlaps and long travel distances, noting that these contradicted the concept of hyper localism. Concerns were expressed that whichever plan was adopted, significant challenges might arise that had not been fully addressed. It was clarified that all proposals submitted to Government projected similar payback periods of approximately two to three years. Therefore, the 4-5-1 proposal was not a financial outlier, as the assumptions and financial assessments across Devon were broadly comparable, despite some differences in detail. The geographical areas were challenging due to the need to satisfy government criteria particularly financial resilience while accommodating diverse political and local interests. The rural nature of Devon meant that any proposal would involve large areas, and this was true across all submissions.

- Whether the costings and savings in the proposal accounted for additional costs that might fall on parish councils, such as the need for full-time clerks, which could lead to higher precepts and staffing challenges. The Government's lack of reference to the south west in the Chancellor's budget statement should influence the Council's approach to reorganisation. It was explained that the Leader acknowledged the potential impact on parish councils was a valid concern. It was noted that similar responsibilities had already shifted to parishes over the past 20 years. While the future was uncertain, it was considered likely that parishes would need to take on additional responsibilities such as maintaining services if they wished to preserve them.
- Did the submission accord with previous Council resolutions from 8 January 2020? Members were reminded of the three key resolutions:
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
- There was no evidence of Member scrutiny, nor references to a referendum or proportional representation in the submission and therefore believed it did not align with those resolutions. It was explained that from the outset, the Leader had sought to engage with other district councillors and had taken forward views on issues such as a referendum and proportional representation. However, these were not unanimously supported and it was considered unlikely that the Government would agree to them.
- Would the Cabinet decision be subject to call-in as a key decision and that the Cabinet recommendations did not require consideration of views expressed at this meeting, querying whether that was intentional. It was explained that the purpose of holding the full Council meeting immediately before the Cabinet meeting was to ensure all Members had adequate opportunity to discuss, debate, and influence the decision. The timing was necessary to meet the submission deadline of 28 November 2025, consistent with other Devon councils making decisions that week.
- The Leader reminded members of subsequent decisions of council on this subject that took place after the January meeting being referenced.
- The hard work of councillors and officers over the past year was acknowledged but concerns were shared about reduced local accountability and loss of the wider skill set currently available in district councils under the proposed system. Comments were asked for on the positions of Torbay and Exeter regarding their preferred options for unitary authorities and whether they would support and work to make the 4-5-1 model effective if adopted? Members also queried whether there was any commitment to reducing costs for local residents under the new system? The Leader stated that it would be

inappropriate to comment on other proposals at this meeting, as they were not on the agenda. He emphasised that whichever proposal was ultimately selected whether the 4-5-1 model, the 9-1-1 model, or another, all councils would need to work together to achieve the best outcome for residents. The Leader reiterated that the final decision rested with central government but expressed confidence that collaboration would follow once a decision was made.

- Whether consideration had been given to the possibility of the Government rejecting all submitted proposals and imposing its own solution, such as requiring Plymouth to be included. What contingency planning had been done for such scenarios and expressed concern that Government changes or budget decisions could significantly alter the process. It was stated that potential Government “curveballs” were unknown, though concerns such as significant budget cuts were expressed. The Leader noted as an example that delays to the White Paper on SEND provision could have major financial implications.

The Leader **MOVED** and seconded by Cllr D Wulff:

1. That Council notes the report and LGR submission document.
2. That Council endorses the submission, as being in accordance with previous decisions of this Council to develop its reorganisation proposal.

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

Those voting **AGAINST** Councillors: H Tuffin and G Westcott.

Those **ABSTAINED** from voting: Councillors M Binks, J Buczkowski, S Clist, F J Colthorpe and R Roberts.

Note:

- i. *Report previously circulated.
- ii. Councillors: H Tuffin and G Westcott supported recommendation 1 and was against recommendation 2.

(The meeting ended at 19:20pm)

CHAIR