

Report for: Full Council

Date of Meeting: 21.02.2024

Subject: Consultation on proposed Combined County Authority (the 'devolution deal')

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendation(s)

The Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal was approved for consultation by Devon County Council and Torbay by their respective cabinets/executives on 2nd February. The consultation went live on 12th February. All information can be found either in the reports that went to DCC's cabinet or at the webpage here:

<https://www.devontorbaydeal.org.uk/>

Recommendation(s):

- 1. It is recommended that council approves the response (as published) to the consultation, and that delegated authority is given to the Chief Executive in conjunction with the Leader to add to this if required following district-level briefing by the team at DCC.**

Section 2 – Proposed responses

- We note the county is intending to propose this deal under the process described by statute.
- We support the principles of devolved decision-making and firmly believe that decisions taken in Devon are more likely to be beneficial to the specific needs of the communities in Mid Devon than those taken in Whitehall. However, we have a number of specific concerns that we would urge parties to consider and address as part of any implementation.
- In common with other district colleagues across Devon, we have concerns in a number of specific areas:
 - UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – we expect this (or its successor) to continue to be devolved to districts within Devon to deliver. We note that there is currently no certainty about any future rounds of the UKSPF programme. However, in line with government commitment to replace lost EU funding, we would expect the shared prosperity fund, or equivalent replacement funding streams in future, to

be devolved from the CCA to district level by default. The remaining CCA remit should be to broker conversations about strategic commissioning of countywide (generic) business support activity, and to maximise the effectiveness of local investment aligned to the economic support activity newly-returning to the county council as part of the winding down of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). However, since the LEP failed on both its democratic mandate and often in its local relevance, we would wish the CCA to set off firmly on the right foot by committing to retain local delivery methods for business support where this is currently in place via districts.

- Housing empowerment – we expect the CCA to enable and accelerate delivery with and through districts and local housing associations. Much is made of the potential for a shared strategic investment pipeline with Homes England, and while we recognise the potential for shared investment and the need for strategic conversations to deliver this, we would wish to make it clear that districts expect existing housing functions and groupings to be utilised – such as the Devon Housing Task Force, which already covers the whole of the Devon and Torbay area (and which is currently chaired by a District Council Leader). The aims of the CCA should be to build on best practice and expertise; to provide a stronger platform and empower the excellent work being done across the Team Devon landscape, not to duplicate or add extra bureaucracy. We understand that this is the intention, however we would wish to be involved more fully in the discussions around ‘operationalising’ the CCA.
- Voting rights and governance – we understand that the government rejected the proposed amendment by the House of Lords to allow district councils to be constituent members of the new Combined County Authorities. We would hope that a more enlightened future government takes steps to amend this. However, in the meantime we would ask that all such opportunities within the law are considered to ensure that districts can have a voice on reserved matter issues. Particularly when many of these are of relevance to districts and existing partnership ambitions are already in place, for example around carbon reduction and the Devon Climate Emergency. We welcome and firmly support the proposal to move ‘Team Devon’ onto a more robust governance footing by converting this to a statutory joint committee in order to inform the voting intentions wielded at the CCA board. However, we regret that such a workaround is necessary and note the policy paradox of government devolution diminishing the voice of local democratic institutions.
- Transport – we recognise that operational highway matters will remain with DCC and Torbay respectively. However, in the duty to produce a joint strategic transport plan across the CCA geography, we would urge inclusion of the district councils in the formulation of this in order to ensure that vital land-use and housing plans are aligned to transport plans and that sustainable transport options are embedded – both in terms of strategic intent and future investment.
- Community and involvement of local towns and parishes – the voice of the Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC) is a welcome one

within the current 'Team Devon' arena, and we would strongly support the inclusion and recognition of town and parishes in the implementation and operationalising of the CCA. Housing, transport, jobs, skills and sustainability are strategic issues with often local or hyper-local solutions. The CCA should aim to be the bridge that demonstrates strategic intervention and scale, while empowering our communities' ambition and aspiration.