

Report to: Cabinet



Date of Meeting 5 February 2025

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Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Update

Report summary:

This report provides an update on proposals relating to devolution and local government reorganisation. This follows the publication of the English Devolution White Paper on the 16th December 2024. This was the subject of a report considered by Cabinet on the 8th January and then full Council on the 9th January. This report sets out the key options in relation to the potential configuration of both strategic and principal authorities. It also highlights that further clarification, in terms of the process for submitting proposals for unitary authorities and whether the planned County Council elections scheduled for May will be postponed, is still awaited from national government.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes ☒ No ☐

Policy Framework Yes ☒ No ☐

Recommendation:

That Cabinet note the contents of this report and receives additional reports as further clarification is received and the proposals develop.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure Cabinet is fully engaged in the devolution and local government reorganisation proposals.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- ☒ Climate Action and Emergency Response
- ☒ Coast, Country and Environment
- ☒ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- ☒ Communications and Democracy
- ☒ Economy
- ☒ Finance and Assets
- ☒ Strategic Planning
- ☒ Sustainable Homes and Communities
- ☒ Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: High Risk; The future shape and form of local government structures will be a key determinant of how funds and powers flow from central government which will ultimately impact how services are delivered to residents.

Links to background information [English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK](#) [Devolution and local government reorganisation frequently asked questions](#) | [Local Government Association](#)

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- ☒ A supported and engaged community
 - ☒ Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
 - ☒ Resilient economy that supports local business
 - ☒ Financially secure and improving quality of services
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1. Background and context

1.1 The English Devolution White Paper was published on the 16th December 2024. This committed to a devolution by default approach with an explicit preference for expanding the mayoral model. This was allied to a policy of local government reorganisation which would see an end to the current two-tier system of District and County Council and instead the creation of Principal and Strategic Authorities with guideline populations of 500k and 1.5m people respectively.

1.2 The publication of the White Paper was the trigger for a series of extraordinary Council meeting being convened across Devon during the first full week in January. There was a pressing deadline of the 10th January to request to delay the planned May 2025 County Council elections, which could only come from the County Council, and to submit an expression of interest to be become part of the Devolution Priority Programme. The latter was for areas that wished to move forward at pace with the establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority with a view to holding inaugural mayoral elections in May 2026.

2. Current Position

2.1 The publication of the White Paper prompted an intense period of activity. Alongside the County Council requesting the postponement of the May elections, one of 16 County areas nationally, a number of options as to how future Principal and Strategies Authorities could be configured have emerged. These are summarised below;

Principal Authority

- 1) Single Unitary
- 2) Two Unitaries e.g. East/West or North/South
- 3) Expanded Plymouth Unitary
- 4) New Exeter Unitary

Strategic Authority

- 1) Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority (default)
- 2) Devon, Plymouth & Torbay Mayoral Combined Authority
- 3) Peninsular Mayoral Combined Authority
- Including Cornwall
- 4) Expanded Heart of Wessex Mayoral Combined Authority
- Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire, Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole

2.2 The White Paper sets out an expectation that consensus will be reached between partners in particular areas as to how best to proceed. It is also clear that Ministers will have powers to direct if this does not prove possible.

3. Assessment

3.1 It is clear that there is currently a complex landscape of potential competing options across the wider Devon area. Considerable work is ongoing to engage all partners to work through the various options and to try reach consensus. It is important to consider the arrangements for both Principal and Strategic Authorities in this respect. The lack of consensus in relation to how a Mayoral Combined Authority could be established has seemingly prevented an expression of interest being submitted to become part of the Devolution Priority Programme. This could see Devon becoming disadvantaged relative to other areas, such as Dorset/Somerset/Wiltshire to the east, which may be able to access the type of additional powers and funding only available to Mayoral Combined Authorities.

3.2 At the time of writing there are two outstanding points of clarification that directly impact the next steps. These are;

- 1) Whether the Secretary of State agrees to the postponement of the May elections – if the answer to this is yes then it is expected that this will lead to an accelerated timeline for local government reorganisation through to April 2027
- 2) The process for submitting proposals for new unitary Councils – a further Ministerial letter was expected by the end of January including details of the process moving forward and the associated assessment criteria. This is still outstanding although the deadline for initial proposals is still expected to be in March of this year.

Further reports will come to Cabinet and Council as further clarification is received.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Proposals around devolution and local government reorganisation have emerged at a fast pace. Considerable time and effort is being invested in to exploring the different options with a view to trying to reach consensus. Whilst there is ongoing uncertainty around key points presently, it is vital that this engagement both continues and expands to include wider partners and stakeholders.

Financial implications:

There are no direct financial implications from the recommendations in this report

Legal implications:

The legal issues are dealt with in the body of the report.