

County Councillors report
January 2025
Happy New Year
Local Government Reorganisation

The English Devolution White Paper was published just before Christmas.

Extract from the ministers letter probably gives some explanation as to where we are heading as residents in a two tier area;

Local government reorganisation My intention is to formally invite unitary proposals in January 2025 from all councils in two-tier areas, and small neighbouring unitary councils. In this invitation, I will set out further detail on the criteria I will consider when taking decisions on the proposals that are submitted to Government. I intend to ask for interim plans by March 2025. As set out in the White Paper, new unitary councils must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. For most areas, this will mean creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more. However, there may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area, including on devolution. Final decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis. We will ask you to work with other councils in your area to develop unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area, rather than developing competing proposals.

In the White Paper the Government has explicitly issued a direction to Councils in two tier areas to reorganise into unitary authorities and to look towards setting up strategic Combined Authorities with an Elected Mayor. In our case in Devon, that would mean a Combined Authority and Elected Mayor for Devon and Cornwall.

Statement from Andrew

Following publication of the Governments Devolution White paper it is clear that considerable change is going to happen in Local Government in Devon. The County Council is going to be abolished, as will all the Devon District Councils.

We have two options;

- **1. Do nothing and the government will impose changes**
- **2. Engage with government to get the best result for the residents of Devon.**

I believe that engagement with the government is the best option.

While I may not agree with all the government's proposals, I need to do everything I can to ensure that the changes will make local government sustainable for the long term and is able to withstand shocks like the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the world financial crisis. At the heart of all this must be

a stronger voice to inform the government of the issues my residents in Torrington Rural and the residents in the wider area of Devon face.

The shape and size of the new unitary council(s) is the discussion that will come next, and will no doubt be contentious. The Devon District Council Leaders have said they don't want a single Devon unitary council as it is too big. However, if you start to carve up Devon then be careful of what you wish for. We here in Torrington Rural and Torridge run the risk of being left in a rump rural unitary authority which isn't viable, or as an appendage to a 'greater Exeter' council. For this reorganisation to work I believe the new authority will need to cover both Exeter and as large a rural area as possible to create a balanced authority that is not skewed to one population centre.

The Government wants draft proposals submitted by March, discussions in the summer and a final proposal agreed in September.

DCC held an emergency Full Council meeting on the 9th January and resolved the following.

- a. Support the Leader of the Council to submit a letter of intent to Government committing to the Government's ambitious programme enabling the Council to Develop plans for local government reorganisation and deliver a Mayoral Strategic Authority.
- b. As a consequence of joining this ambitious programme the County Council will make a request to Government to postpone the County Council elections due to take place in May 2025 to provide the capacity on which reorganisation and mayoral devolution can progress at pace in 2025 to ensure the benefits of reorganisation and devolution for the area are realised as quickly as possible.
- c. The council will thereafter work at pace to develop full proposals for reorganisation in line with Government guidance which will be issued in January 2025, working with and alongside partners to develop plans for sustainable unitary structures which meet the needs and aspirations of the varied localities within the Devon area, including those of Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay as well as the coastal and market towns and rural areas.

County Council elections are due in May 2025. However, if we are to stick to this timetable the practicality of holding an election is somewhat limited. Councillors elected in May will be planning their redundancy in September. And under this timetable we would likely be having elections to the new 'shadow' unitary authority in May 2026, possibly followed by a Mayoral Election in May 2027.

There are significant decisions over the future of Highways, Libraries and Youth Services to name just 3 areas, that need to be taken in the coming years. These cannot be done if we drag out the reorganisation process over many years. It is in everyone's interests that this is done in as timely and efficient way as possible

However, this will ultimately be the Government's decision. They may choose to continue with the elections. But election or no election, it is clear that Devon County Council and Torridge District Council are going to cease to exist in a few short years and will be replaced by a new unitary council. I will do all that I can to defend the interests of Torrington Rural as we go through this period of change.

District Councillor Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin Report – January 2025

External Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

We heard from Andy Bell from North Devon Biosphere.

The Biosphere was designated in 1976 and extended in 2002 to cover a much wider area. It covers 4 District Authorities, over 5000 farms 2 National Parks and 1 AONB. The Biosphere comprises of 35 organisations working in partnership. Funding: £70k from DCC, £31k combined from TDC and NDC

They have secured £12M project funding over the next 5 years (primarily from Environment Agency and DEFRA).

Whole ethos of Biosphere "creating a positive future by connecting people and nature". Looking at the benefits from the environment and ecosystem services.

Key areas of work: tourism, farming, forestry, fishing, technology, climate change adaptation.

They're in the very early stages of a project relating to regenerative farming and carbon payments. Looking at farms possibly becoming accredited for regenerative farming, allowing them to sell at a higher price and creating more local farms shops/food hubs. "Farm to fork"

They have a Biosphere explorer app. 80% of visitors here come for environmental factors.

The green economy group working with Uni Plymouth and Exeter, and MET office, working on natural flood management.

They are doing a lot of work with farmers to reduce pollution risks. Also working with Farmers on access to nature- engaging with landowners- for example looking at community Woodlands.

The importance of salt marshes and mud flats. Sheep can also still graze salt marshes (and apparently taste better too...?!)

Marine work- offshore renewables, X-Links cables, aquaculture- seaweed. Impact of storms, is it sustainable? All needs careful consideration and also looking at wider benefits in the area. 'Marine net-gain' coming forward in the future? Lundy "no-take" zone a success and fishermen wanting more of it because they can see the benefits- more fish spilling out into the other areas.

Working with cultural partners eg Beaford Arts, connecting with people in different ways- theatre, art, photography etc

Engaging young people- teacher training across 12 schools locally, about climate change and the local environment.

Working with Southwest water- looking at natural solutions to pollution of rivers

Extraordinary Full Council re Local Gov Reorganisation.

Devon and Torbay Combined Authority (CCA) is already on the way through previous government (devolution).

The new government's ambition is for unitary councils to cover England. Currently, there are 21 County Council areas (shire districts).

10th January was deadline for councils to express they'd like to move at the fastest pace and postpone May elections. We're likely to find out at the end of January.

Devon District Council leaders signed a joint statement not supporting a single unitary for Devon as it's too big an area. They recognise the government ambitions but believe it needs proper consideration and shouldn't be rushed through. They also agreed that Devon County elections should not be postponed and should go ahead in May 25. It's unlikely that the reorganisation would be sorted within one year, and therefore probable that the current county council could ask for extension for yet another year, which we don't view as being democratic.

Torrige District Council voted by majority to send a letter to the Minister for housing, communities and local government Jim McMahon, Reiterating the points made in the joint statement. 19 For, 1 against, three abstentions.



[JOINT STATEMENT: Devon District Councils - Update on devolution and local government reform | Torrige District Council](#)
torridge.gov.uk

Internal Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

TDC has previously put out a request to parish councils re listed buildings but not heard anything back, so now considering looking at compiling a targeted list of buildings at risk.

Asset management plan- heard from Harvey Gardner new estates manager.

Torrige holds 141 assets 84,000ft

Income stream commercial and non-commercial equals approximately £1M

The void is currently 2.8% don't want it to go above 5%

Climate change response- we now have 2 electric commercial vehicles with third proposed for Burrows team. Decarbonisation program 2025: 10 higher energy-using properties assessed looking at potential for solar PV, air source heat pumps, LED lighting etc. EV charging: nine additional at Riverbank house coming forward in the next few months.

Car parking- 2024/25 revenue projection £2.1M 10% up on 23/24. Looking at investment in new machines for National Parking Platform- cashless payments as well as cash and debit cards.

Chris Fuller- economic development officer:

Economic strategy brief update:

The strategy for 2024-29 was agreed by full council last year. Wider action plans are now progressing from this. Business workshops are being held at Caddsdon. Clean maritime and green energy cluster, 40 businesses met at Appledore. Lego robotics workshops, sponsoring schools for national competition. North Devon plus and Biosphere doing lots of work with businesses and grants being given through Rural England Prosperity Fund. Cultural awards coming up- deadline is 3rd Feb, please nominate any individuals or groups who you think should be recognised for their input into our colourful culture here in Torridge and North Devon, there are lots of different categories, from film to heritage to sports, and many more! <https://www.torridge.gov.uk/article/22096/Flourishing-Culture-Awards-Make-a-nomination#:~:text=The%20Flourishing%20Culture%20Awards%20will,in%20North%20Devon%20and%20Torridge.>

Estuary strategy update:

Looking at the opportunity of Appledore maritime innovation Centre. Looking at the future of Biddeford Quay and its place-making role. The regeneration of Biddeford with the Quay front as a focal point. The heritage harbour stretches right the way up the River Torridge to Rosemoor. Overall vision: bringing together innovation, protection and enhancement. Recognising the importance and increasing interest in the harbour and estuary and how it can be best used to develop the economy and regeneration of the area.

A lot more work to be done on the strategy to consider all of the options and opportunities, and the committee gave an extension of time for this.