

Report to Parish Council from County Councillor Andrew Saywell

January 2025

Happy New Year

Local Government Reorganisation

The English Devolution White Paper was published on 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 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.

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.