

DCC Update Report for Merton Parish Council – March 2024

Dear Councillors,

I am sorry I cannot be with you this evening but please find my written report below.

Devolution/Local Government Reorganisation

The Government have announced that the DCC Elections for May 2025 will still be going ahead. Unfortunately, they have also confirmed their intention to abolish the County and District Councils and replace DCC and TDC with a new unitary council.

Following the announcement in the House of Commons we received another letter from the Minister of State for Local Government. In that letter the Government have instructed all councils in Devon – the 8 Districts, the County Council and the Plymouth and Torbay unitary councils – to submit an ‘interim plan’ to the Government by the **21st March**. They then expect full and final proposals to be submitted by **28th November**. If the Minister accepts the proposal, they would then, according to his letter to local councils, look to hold elections to the new ‘shadow’ unitary council(s) as soon as possible.

So potentially good news for election aficionados. We will have elections in May this year for the County Council and then potentially have elections for the new shadow unitary council in May next year!

In reality, do I think that will happen? Probably not. More likely that the new unitary elections will take place in May 2027 instead of the District Council Elections. BUT, that depends upon how long the Government will take to make a decision on LGR in Devon and also whether there are any delays in the reorganisations taking place elsewhere. There are 8 other ‘fast track’ Council areas which have been chosen ahead of Devon. I can see any delays in one or several of those areas having a knock on impact on us if we are not careful.

Feedback from the Ministry to DCC officials has been that more than one proposal can be submitted on the 21st March. Plans are being worked up as I type and I will be worked on right up until the 21st March. At this stage I think it likely DCC will submit a number of indicative proposals to the Government rather than one. That way the ‘new’ Council elected in May can then chose which proposal(s) to develop further after the elections and in time for the final deadline on the 28th November.

Although the Government’s aspirations are for all 11 Councils in Devon to come together to work up and agree on a single proposal, I have to say I think it is extremely unlikely a consensus between all 11 authorities will emerge. There are frankly too many organisations, too many opinions and bluntly too many vested interests for everyone to agree that ‘X’ or ‘Y’ solution is the way forward.

It is more likely to happen is that competing proposals will be submitted to the Government. They will then take a decision and impose it on us, whether we like it or not.

We have a timetable that has been set for us. I did consider in light of elections now happening whether we should have sat this out until after May. However, there is no scope for waiting until after the election and I feel it would be a dereliction of duty just to sit on my hands and say nothing and let other Councils like Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter dictate to us and the Government over what

the future representation of Torrington Rural should look like without the involvement of the County Council.

The new County Council can then decide what to do after the elections and that will be there prerogative. But whether we like this situation or not, I feel at this time the 'do nothing' option is the worst of all as that will almost certainly see something we don't like get imposed on us.

As I also reiterated in my last report, if we are still arguing over what the new unitary council(s) should look like by this time next year then it goes without saying that taking decisions on the future of highways, libraries, youth services, etc. is going to be difficult if we don't even know what the shape of the new council looks like. Awarding either very short term contracts or doing temporary in-housing pending a break up of Devon CC could be very costly and ultimately will mean less money for bread and butter services. The effect this has on the Council workforce is again, hugely unsettling and if there is long term uncertainty over people's jobs and roles, the more likely it is people will leave both DCC and the District Councils for more secure jobs, and the Councils have to fill those posts with agency staff. Again, more expensive and less money for frontline services.

But for the time being we have a deadline of 21st March to work to and this is what DCC will be doing. I know that talks are being held with other District and Unitary Councils so I hope there will be cooperation and not petty infighting in the coming weeks as we all work on a proposal that work best for our residents.

Hopefully by next month's meeting I'll be in a better position to advise what this new council will potentially look like for us all. The stakes in this are very high – if we get this wrong it will cost us, the residents of Devon, very dearly.

Other Matters

DCC Budget – The final budget will be agreed by DCC Full Council in February. Despite the loss of the rural services grant, additional income from the second homes council tax has ensured we have a balanced budget and no major service reductions or cuts. There will be an additional £4m going into the Highways Budget... though had the Rural Services Grant not been taken away I think we could have found an extra £10m from the Second Homes Council Tax for Highways. Instead, this funding has had to go into other services to prevent major cutbacks within Adult Social Care or Children's Services.

Overall the net revenue budget rises to £784 million. Of which approx. £383 million is for Adult Social Care (up 8.2%) and £237 million is for Children's Services (up 5.5%). That leaves a rather more modest circa £164 million for everything else...

Happy to talk in more detail on the budget at the next meeting.

So busy times this month and next! Any issues or concerns please get in touch.

Best regards,
Andrew