

Record of Decisions

English Devolution White Paper

Decision Taker

Cabinet on 09 January 2025.

Decision

1. That, in light of the policy position of the Government for universal coverage of Strategic Authorities, and in recognition that the most far-reaching and flexible powers will be given to Mayoral Strategic Authorities, support for a Mayoral Strategic Authority comprising of Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, should agreement be reached by all authorities, be confirmed.
2. That the Chief Executive be instructed to prepare an evidence base and develop an options appraisal for Local Government reorganisation, for consideration by the Council in due course.

Reason for the Decision

To respond to the Government's English Devolution White Paper that was published on 16 December 2024.

Implementation

The decision in respect of the English Devolution White Paper will come into force immediately as the decision maker has decided that any delay likely to be caused by the call-in process would prejudice the public and the Council's interest. The Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinator was consulted on 2 January 2025.

Information

The Government published its English Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024. One of the Government's priorities within the White Paper was in respect of widening devolution across England, with an approach of "universal" and "devolution by default," rather than the current deals-based approach. The White Paper clearly set out that the most far-reaching and flexible powers would be for Mayoral Strategic Authorities, describing it as "unprecedented powers and budgets for Mayors," including:

- Flexible allocated funding, with a long-term investment fund and, once the area has qualified, funding granted through a flexible Integrated Settlement,
- A representative sitting on the Council of Nations and Regions,
- A representative on the Mayoral Council,
- A mandate to develop a Local Growth Plan, with local growth priorities agreed with the Government providing focus for central government and regional collaboration,
- Membership of the Mayoral Data Council,
- Powers drawn from a strengthened Devolution Framework, with a significant devolution offer that will continue to grow over time,
- A clear pathway to unlocking higher levels of devolution reserved for the most mature institutions, including access to the Integrated Settlement which will grow in scope over time.

In light of the benefits of a Mayoral Strategic Authority to areas and residents, informal discussions about the potential to create the same across upper tier councils in Cornwall and Devon had taken place. Whilst it had not been possible to finalise an agreement at this stage, but in recognition of the national direction of travel of universal coverage of strategic authorities and the drive for these to be Mayoral, the Cabinet wished for its support for the same to be noted.

In relation to the contents of the White Paper regarding Local Government re-organisation, it was understood that all two tier areas, together with small neighbouring authorities would receive an invitation from Government during January 2025 to submit proposals for the same. It was understood that interim proposals would be due in March 2025 with final proposals due in either May or Autumn 2025 (dependent upon engagement in priority programmes).

The development of proposals for Local Government reorganisation would need to be informed by a detailed evidence base that ensured that all relevant factors were taken into account. It was important that Officers started to work on developing an evidence base, working with the other authorities across Devon to gather all of the necessary information in order to prepare an options appraisal for Council to consider.

At the Cabinet meeting, and after hearing the views of other members present, Councillor David Thomas proposed and Councillor Chris Lewis seconded a motion that was agreed unanimously by the Cabinet, as set out above.

Alternative Options considered and rejected at the time of the decision

The Government had confirmed that, regardless of the publication of the White Paper, the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (DT CCA) would be established in February/March 2025. As set out in the White Paper, the DT CCA will automatically become a Foundation Strategic Authority with the proposed Devolution Framework indicating very similar powers to those which the DT CCA is expected to hold from its inception.

In deepening and widening devolution in England, the Government had set out principles around the geographies of Strategic Authorities. The default assumption was for them to have a combined population of 1.5 million or above (although it is accepted that in some places smaller authorities may be necessary). The geographies must not create devolution “islands” by leaving areas which were too small to go it alone or which did not have natural partners. The draft Statutory Instrument and emerging Constitution makes clear that, within the emerging DT CCA, a non-constituent seat was available to Plymouth City Council should they wish to take this place up. The Leaders of Torbay Council and Devon County Council had also stated that the door was open to Plymouth to join as a Constituent Member in the future. It was an option therefore to maintain our status (with Devon) as a Foundation Strategic Authority and in the absence of proposals for a Mayoral Strategic Authority this would be the default position. It would also be an option to seek to be become a Mayoral Strategic Authority with other authorities, however it should be noted that no other authorities have expressed a desire to do so.

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Does the call-in procedure apply?

No

Declarations of interest (including details of any relevant dispensations issued by the Standards Committee)

None

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Signed: _____ Date: 10 January 2025
Leader of Torbay Council on behalf of the Cabinet