

# Interim plan for local government reorganisation impacting on Torbay DRAFT

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## Introduction

In responding to the Statutory Invitation to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government within Devon, Torbay Council is considering a range of options. This interim plan sets out our progress in developing proposals in line with the criteria and guidance provided by the Government.

The Leader of the Council has been working with the Leaders of all the other authorities in Devon to understand their positions. Members of the Shadow Cabinet have also been engaging with local authorities across Devon. Discussions have been held internally between the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet of Torbay Council, as well as with all other members of the Council, our strategic partners within our Place Leadership Board, our Members of Parliament, and with interested members of our community who attended a public engagement event held ahead of this interim plan being finalised.

Four options have been considered by councillors, our Place Leadership Board and were presented at the public engagement event. The opinion poll at the end of the event showed that respondents were not in favour of a single unitary authority covering all of Devon – a view widely shared by our councillors and stakeholders.

Progress towards the three options currently under consideration (as set out in the table below) is set out in this interim plan in order of preference. The fourth option is described later in the plan with the reasons why it is has been discounted explained.

	Torbay	Torbay and South Devon	Southern Devon	Median Unitary Authorities **
Population	139,300	292,000	430,000	266,460
% 65+	27%	tbc	28%	18.95%
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	62.88	885.8	2784.3	230.1
Council Tax Base 24/25	47,374	110,363 *	160,354	93,950
NNDR 24/25	£27.7m	tbc	£101.4m	£90.8m
GVA	£2,404m	£5,974m *	£15,741m	
% of population in IMD Decile 1	17.6%	8.4%	5.8%	13.3%
% of population in IMD Decile 1 and 2	28.1%	15.1%	10.4%	29.0%
% of population in IMD Decile 1, 2 and 3	49.0%	29.7%	20.5%	40.4%

\* approximations

\*\* unitaries and metropolitan boroughs

Once feedback is received from Government on the likely competing interim plans submitted by the Devon local authorities, a cohesive approach to developing final proposals (and the associated engagement) across the whole of Devon will need to be determined and implemented. This will enable us to show how the councils in Devon have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.

In providing feedback, we would welcome confirmation that future multi-year financial settlements will include a long-term sustainable approach to the funding of adult social care, recognition of the demand for services (and increased costs of those services) in coastal unitary authorities, and the need to end “cliff-end” funding. Longer term reforms of local government finance are required to ensure the long-term viability of any local authority, whether they be existing or newly formed.

## Option 1: Torbay Council

### **Size, boundaries and efficiencies**

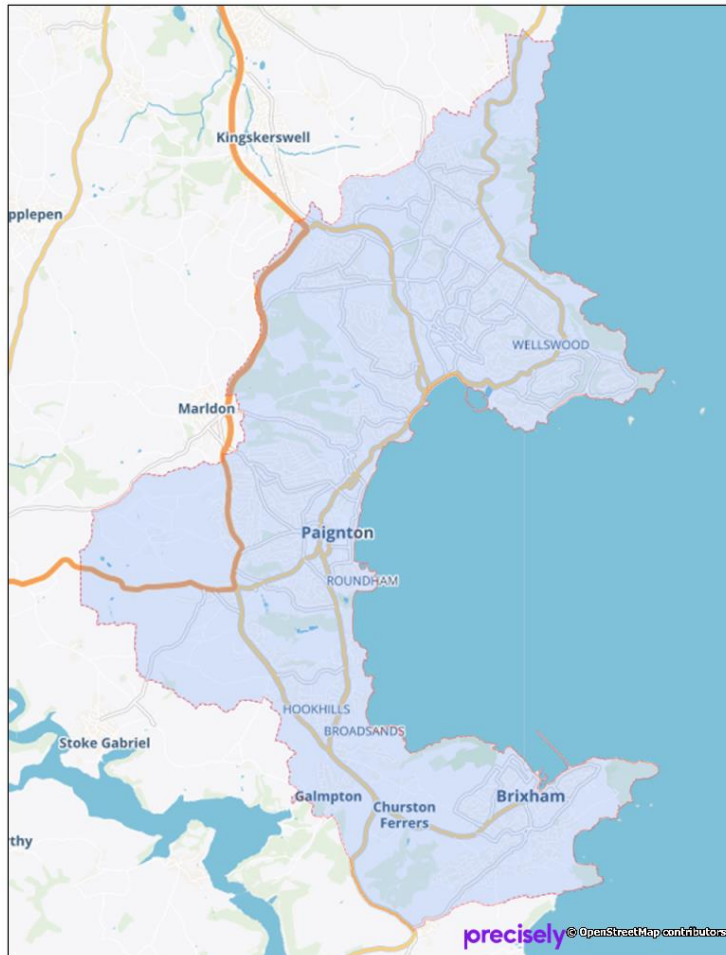
Torbay Council has been a unitary authority since 1998. It sits along the southern coast of Devon covering the three towns of Torquay, Paignton and Brixham. It is the second largest conurbation in Devon with a population of 139,300. Annually, we have 3.8 million visitors.

Whilst we are a small unitary authority, we are highly successful. Our Children’s Services are rated by Ofsted as Good and our groundbreaking partnership with the NHS has been delivering joined up health and adult social care for almost 20 years. We operate Brixham Harbour which is the largest commercial fishing port in England, Wales and Northern Ireland when measured by value of catch landed.

Through careful financial management, Torbay Council is in a secure financial position. We have agreed the last four budgets with no significant changes to services. Not only that, we have been able to invest in our Children’s Services, adult social care and place-based services. Our Financial Sustainability Plans are helping to ensure that our high-cost budget items remain on track and that innovative solutions are explored and delivered - all to ensure that we provide the best outcomes within our financial envelope.

The creation and operation of our wholly-owned company, SWISCo, provides much improved services such as waste collection and management, recycling, street scene and parks, and is just one example how as a small, agile organisation we can make change happen quickly and positively for our communities.

In recognition of our success to date, we won the Most Improved Council Award at the LGC Awards in 2023.



	Torbay	Median Unitary Authorities *
Population	139,300	266,460
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Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	62.88	230.1
Council Tax Base 24/25	47,374	93,950
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\* unitaries and metropolitan boroughs

Our Community and Corporate Plan describes our mission of putting our residents at the heart of everything we do, how we will always ensure a strong grip on finances, working with our communities and partners to deliver a sustainable future. We will deliver quality services, improve our economy and protect and enhance our built and natural environments, so that we are all proud of our Bay.

We have significantly improved our Children's Services. By focussing on engaging our workforce and agreeing with them to adopt restorative practice, we have developed a recruitment and retention strategy, including a commitment to "grow your own" through the creation of our Learning Academy. Our success in recruiting newly qualified social workers as well as training and developing existing staff has achieved outstanding results with a current vacancy rate of only 13%. An engaged trained and focussed workforce has enabled real traction on improvement, culminating in being rated good across all judgement areas.

Our pioneering approach to integrated health and social care has a well-established track record of reducing staff shortages in the care sector and speeding up hospital discharges. Furthermore, for almost twenty years, the model has proved itself despite our ageing demographic and socioeconomic challenges. The recent LGA peer review report describes Torbay's Integrated Care Organisation (ICO) as "...a pathfinder and national leader, and there is much learning that can and should be shared from this experience." Our close relationship with the community and voluntary sector in Torbay, not least through the Community Helpline, is successfully diverting customers away from statutory services, with support, advice and guidance being provided within and across the community itself.

We have made considerable strides in our whole council transformation programme. Born out of advice received from the LGA to have a wider focus, the programme is built using learning from other local authorities and a systems approach – putting our communities, our residents and our customers at the heart of everything we do. Our operating model is built on the principle of consistency, rather than uniformity, to standardise and simplify our operations whilst increasing data sharing to deliver better services. We are consistently reviewing every service the council delivers with a firm focus on sustainable outcomes.

We are driving investment and making positive change, evidenced by the significant levels of investment from Government and the private sector. We have an ambitious capital programme with projects at varying stages of delivery – we are part of the Town Deal initiative, we have received Future High Streets funding and we are working with the Government in a Levelling Up Partnership. We have received Levelling Up Fund monies and are part of the recently formed Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority.

## **Barriers and challenges**

Our recognition as the Most Improved Council was a result of making significant improvements over recent years. However, we recognise that we will always have a focus on improvement, and we have an approach in place to help ensure that we remain a sustainable council.

Having been rated as good for our Children's Services, we are now absolutely focussed on becoming outstanding and in February 2023 were awarded Registered Restorative Organisation status by the Restorative Justice Council, the first local authority within the UK to receive this award. If Torbay Council is subsumed within a larger unitary authority combining with a part of a

less highly performing neighbouring council area, whatever the boundaries, there is a real risk the performance of our Children's Services will be pulled backwards with devastating consequences for our children and young people.

In November 2021, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission conducted a joint inspection of Torbay to judge the effectiveness of the area in implementing the special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND) reforms as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. As a result of the findings of this inspection, HM's Chief Inspector determined that a Written Statement of Action was required because of areas of weakness. With our partners we are delivering against the Written Statement of Action but are aware of the improvements that we still need to make so that children, young people and their parents/carers receive the services they need. At the time of writing, a further inspection of SEND services is being undertaken.

In addition, the Council has been working with the Schools' Forum over recent years to address the pressures on the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Block. In February 2022, the Council was invited to take part in the Safety Valve intervention programme with the Department for Education (DfE). As part of the programme, we and our partners have produced, and achieved thus far, a deficit recovery plan that leads to a balanced High Needs Block by 2026/2027. The DfE have agreed to fund the cumulative deficit of up to £12.91 million as long as milestones are met during the process. To date we have received £6.193 million from the Department for Education towards the deficit.

As with our wider Children's Services, there is a risk that, as part of a larger unitary authority, the challenges currently being experienced by Devon County Council in relation to SEND, their High Needs Block and their response to the Safety Valve will have a hugely detrimental impact on the financial position of a new authority and, more importantly, the children and young people we serve.

Starting with the creation of Torbay NHS Care Trust, Torbay Council and the NHS have spent the last twenty years pioneering collaboration between health and adult social care leading to the establishment of the integrated care organisation (ICO) in October 2015.

A new five-year commitment to our joint working arrangements, through a new Section 75 agreement, was agreed by the Council and NHS partners, which will run until March 2030.

There is a very significant risk that changes to Torbay Council's boundaries would lead to the end of the integrated care organisation and that services that have been provided by the NHS for almost twenty years will need to be disaggregated from the NHS Trust and staff transferred to the local authority. Again, this would result in a hugely detrimental impact on the vulnerable adults who are supported by the Trust.

Housing delivery has been an ongoing challenge across Torbay in recent years despite the adoption of a Local Plan in 2015, dropping to 66% on the Housing Delivery Test 2023 measurement. Regeneration opportunities on brownfield land in our town centres and underutilised tourism assets are beginning to come forward, but these are hampered by viability issues. We have a national landscape designation and special areas of conservation covering the land and the sea around us, we well as the natural geography context of the bay and the challenging topography. We are focussed on bringing forward sustainable development



opportunities, particularly on brownfield sites, investing in regeneration opportunities to change the pendulum on delivery of those challenging sites. Our Local Plan Review is ongoing, and we are developing a good working relationship with Homes England.

Torbay's economy faces key challenges with an ageing workforce, skills gaps, migration of young people and high deprivation levels. However, Torbay also has a strong economy with traditional sectors such as tourism, construction, fishing and healthcare as well as those high-growth sectors including advanced manufacturing, photonics and micro-electronics, supported by the established Torbay Hi-Tech Cluster and the growing Torbay Creative Cluster. Although traditional sectors such as tourism are often lower paid, seasonal employment, they are essential in supporting growth and the wider economy. To ensure the resilience of Torbay's economy, focus needs to be on driving economic growth through supporting high-growth and traditional sectors, creating spaces and support for businesses to develop such as through employment space at Torbay Tech Park and our business support programmes. By leveraging Torbay's unique coastal setting to boost the economy and attract a strong workforce through improving education, training and affordability, Torbay can address the challenges of the economy into opportunities for growth.

### **Boundary and ward implications**

If Torbay Council remained as it currently is, there would be no requirement to change boundaries and there would be no implications for wards within the area. The last review of Torbay's boundaries was carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in 2018. The new arrangements came into effect at the May 2019 elections. There are currently 2852 electors per councillor.

### **Alignment with devolution ambitions**

The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority was established on 5 February 2025. This was the initial step on the devolution journey with the two current upper tier authorities working with the district authorities to make Devon and Torbay better connected, more competitive, and more prosperous.

Torbay Council would continue to be a constituent council of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and would continue its approach to working collaboratively with new unitary authority partners within the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority.

Torbay Council and Devon County Council have publicly stated their preferred position for a Mayoral Strategic Authority covering Devon and Cornwall. It is recognised that the national direction of travel is for there to be universal coverage of strategic authorities and a drive for these to be Mayoral. Given the benefits of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (as outlined in the English Devolution White Paper) to areas and residents, informal discussions about the potential to create such an authority across Cornwall and Devon have taken place although it has not been possible to finalise an agreement at this stage.

Should Cornwall Council not wish to join in a Mayoral Strategic Authority across the wider peninsula, the Leaders of Plymouth City Council, Devon County Council, and Torbay Council are working together to explore the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority for Devon. A Mayoral Strategic Authority promises to supercharge the region's ability to access greater powers and unlock additional funding for economic growth and infrastructure development, such as housing

and transport. By working together, the councils aim to ensure that Devon, Plymouth and Torbay are ready to seize this unique opportunity when the government calls for further submissions of interest.

Deeper and further devolution would bring further decision-making closer to the people of Devon and unlock unprecedented opportunities for growth and innovation.

### **Delivery governance and costs, plus future transformation opportunities**

If Torbay Council remains as it currently is the significant costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team are avoided.

Our continuous improvement and transformation programme would continue and there would not be any negative impacts on crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness.

We already have Financial Sustainability Plans in place to improve the Council's finances and to make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best possible value for their money.

Retaining Torbay Council would enable it to fully focus on delivery our business-as-usual services and duties, including progressing quickly with ensuring we have an up-to-date Local Plan.

## **Option 2: Torbay and South Devon Council**

### **Size, boundaries and efficiencies**

A Torbay and South Devon Council, based around the catchment area of the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust and mirroring the South Local Care Partnership of NHS Devon would create a Council in which services were relatable to place.

Covering an area from Bovey Tracey to Dartmouth, Dawlish to Totnes and including Torbay and large areas of Dartmoor, it would serve a population of approximately 292,000 people. During the summer months, the population includes an additional 100,000 visitors at any one time. The new authority would also have increased room for growth, over and above Option 1.





	Torbay and South Devon	Median Unitary Authorities **
Population	292,000	266,460
% 65+	Tbc	18.95%
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	885.8	230.1
Council Tax Base 24/25	110,363 *	93,950
NNDR 24/25	tbc	£90.8m
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% of population in IMD Decile 1, 2 and 3	29.7%	40.4%

\* approximations

\*\* unitaries and metropolitan boroughs

Building on a long and proud history of partnership working and focused around the anchor institutions of Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust and South Devon College, a new Torbay and South Devon Council would create a larger administrative entity. The area is bounded by Dartmoor National Park in the north and the South Devon National Landscape along our coast.

The new organisation would build on the strengths of our existing relationships, partnerships and networks. The NHS Trust was the first in England to integrate hospital and community care with social care. As a well-established integrated care organisation, the community sees at first-hand the positive impact that working together in partnership with other providers – giving everyone a brighter future.

The economy is characterised by world-leading businesses and an entrepreneurial spirit that adds resilience and diversity to the local economy. The area has an established marine, tourism and agricultural sector with expanding environmental digital innovation. This is exemplified by a strong fishing and photonics sector with potential to be a lead for clean growth technologies through working closely with education providers and businesses.

We are home to the highly regarded South Devon College which delivers a range of further education and degree level courses aligned to our marine, construction and green technology sectors. The College is at the centre of the community located with the main college campus in Paignton (Vantage Point) including Hi Tech & Digital Centre, the University Centre South Devon, the South West Energy Centre and South Devon Sports Centre. There are further campuses at Newton Abbot and Torquay (the Centre for Health & Care Professionals) and the Noss Marine Academy in Kingswear.

The Torbay and South Devon authority would be well connected by strategic road and rail networks, providing the critical arteries that support and sustain both the local and regional economy.

As an existing unitary authority, Torbay Council has a solid foundation on which to expand and form the basis for a new Torbay and South Devon Council. The LGA in its 2024 Corporate Peer Challenge recognised that the Council has demonstrated “drive, determination and delivery across a number of spheres” – further, the Council is a “good local and regional partner” and a “confident and influential organisation”.

Torbay’s pioneering approach to integrated health and social care has a well-established track record of reducing staff shortages in the care sector and speeding up hospital discharges. Furthermore, for almost twenty years, the model has proved itself despite Torbay’s ageing demographic and socioeconomic challenges. The recent LGA peer challenge report (adult social care preparation for assurance) describes Torbay’s Integrated Care Organisation (ICO) as “...a pathfinder and national leader, and there is much learning that can and should be shared from this experience.”

As described earlier, Torbay Council’s Children’s Services are rated as good and we are delivering against our SEND Written Statement of Action and our Safety Valve Agreement. Whilst the risks remain of performance declining within a larger unitary authority, these can be more easily mitigated on a smaller geography than a single unitary authority for the whole of Devon.

In many cases, other upper tier functions are already shared or joined up with the current county council - trading standards is delivered by the Heart of the South West Trading Standards Service; library services are delivered by Libraries Unlimited on behalf of Devon County Council and Torbay Council; and, across Devon, the majority of waste that isn't reduced, reused, recycled or composted is sent to one of two energy recovery facilities either in Exeter or Plymouth. Having developed a Joint Local Transport Plan with the county council in the past, the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority is now the Local Transport Authority.

An operating model built on the principle of consistency, rather than uniformity is scalable across the area and we will work to standardise and simplify our operations whilst increasing data sharing to deliver better public services. Shared customer service standards will ensure that our staff and customers have clear expectations.

The new authority would align its geography with the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust and the South Local Care Partnership of NHS Devon, as well as a significant part of the catchment area for South Devon College. We believe that Torbay's approach to integrated health and social care is part of the answer to the Government's challenge of reforming NHS and social care and would hope that appropriate support is available to expand the integration to cover the wider geography of a new unitary authority.

The new council would remain aligned to existing services delivered by Devon and Cornwall Police (with the boundaries being broadly in line with the South Devon policing area) and Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue.

## **Barriers and challenges**

The challenges described in Option 1 remain with this proposal although the potential for growth helps to outweigh them. However, the potential expansion of Plymouth City Council and Exeter City Council will have an impact on the levels of growth that can be achieved within this Option.

Within a largely rural county, the potential for economic and housing growth can be limited. In developing proposals for multiple unitary authorities, careful consideration will need to be given to the potential for economic and housing growth, which does not disadvantage the other unitary authorities.

We recognise that broadening Torbay Council's current boundaries may not result in a substantial change on delivery against housing targets as neighbouring areas suffer similar constraints to Torbay, however we will look to work closely with the Combined County Authority, and any Strategic Authority in due course, to plan for housing growth distributed appropriately across the area, providing the right developments, with the right housing type in the right locations.

In developing a full proposal, Torbay Council will give consideration to the criteria set out by the Minister in his letter of 5 February 2025. In order to do this, it is essential that the data held by Devon County Council on its upper tier functions is shared openly at the lowest possible level. This will help to ensure that the final proposals are based on accurate information about the needs of the populations and communities on the new authorities.

## **Boundary and ward implications**

This Option would involve boundary changes as the area proposed covers approximately half of South Hams District Council and approximately 80% of Teignbridge District Council. In developing proposals, more detailed consideration will be given to the public service and financial sustainability justification for such boundary changes.

The initial view is that between 4500 and 5000 electors per councillor will ensure both effective democratic representation and governance arrangements that will balance the needs of the area with the guidance from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. In 2023, Devon County Council had 10,432 electors per councillor.

This would mean that the number of councillors would be between 45 and 50 (compared to 57 currently in Plymouth City Council and 36 in Torbay Council).

## **Alignment with devolution ambitions**

The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority was established on 5 February 2025. This was the initial step on the devolution journey with the two current upper tier authorities working with the district authorities to make Devon and Torbay better connected, more competitive, and more prosperous.

Following local government reorganisation in Devon, further consideration will need to be given to the make-up of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority to ensure representation from each new unitary authority whilst maintaining the approach to working collaboratively.

As stated in Option 1, there is a publicly stated preference for a Mayoral Strategic Authority covering Devon and Cornwall, or, where this is not possible, the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority for Devon.

## **Delivery governance and costs, plus future transformation opportunities**

We believe that the indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team are expected to be circa £1,153,000 over a two-year period.

Although not yet developed, the wider implementation costs are likely to be higher than Option 3 given that there will a need to be both a disaggregation and aggregation of district costs (as well the disaggregation of county costs).

## **Option 3: Southern Devon Council**

### **Size, boundaries and efficiencies**

A Southern Devon Council bounded to the north by Dartmoor National Park and to the south by the coastal towns stretching from Salcombe in the west to Dawlish in the east is an area characterised by natural synergies.

The proposed Southern Devon authority would combine South Hams, West Devon, Teignbridge, and Torbay Council, creating a new administrative entity with a population of around 430,000 and importantly room for growth. This aligns with the English Devolution White Paper and aims to enhance service delivery without boundary changes, facilitating smooth transition.



	Southern Devon	Median Unitary Authorities *
Population	430,000	266,460
% 65+	28	18.95%
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	2748.3	230.1
Council Tax Base 24/25	160,354	93,950
NNDR 24/25	£101.4m	£90.8m
GVA	£15,741m	
% of population in IMD Decile 1	5.8%	13.3%
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The economy is diverse, with strengths in marine, tourism, agriculture, and environmental digital innovation. The region also has significant potential for clean growth technologies. Torbay's combination of established companies, specialised facilities like the Electronics and Photonics Innovation Centre (EPIC), and a strong industry cluster makes it a prominent centre for photonics.

The new authority will benefit from strategic road and rail networks, supporting both local and regional economies. There are already plans to align concessionary bus travel within the context of an approved a Joint Local Transport Plan for Devon and Torbay.

Torbay's integrated health and social care model has been successful in reducing staff shortages and speeding up hospital discharges. We believe that Torbay's approach to integrated health and social care is part of the answer to the Government's challenge of reforming NHS and social care and would hope that appropriate support is available to expand the integration to cover the wider geography of a new unitary authority.

South Devon College offers a range of courses aligned with key sectors like marine, construction, and green technology. The new authority will leverage these educational resources to support economic growth.

The new authority will align with the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust and existing police and fire services. The council will align with both the West Devon and South Devon Local Care Partnerships, providing a platform to deliver stronger place-based interventions with NHS and health system partners. Overall, this alignment will enable improved person-centred care and deliver stronger place-based interventions.

The area has significant potential for clean growth, with initiatives in renewable energy and environmental innovation. The new authority will support the UK's ambition to become a clean energy superpower.

The proposals emphasise preserving the unique identities of the cities, towns, and villages in Southern Devon. The new authority has the potential to drive sustainable growth and improve the quality of life for residents.

The four councils have a history of collaboration in areas like building control, procurement, and emergency planning. The new authority will aim to further integrate services, delivering savings and efficiencies. Shared service models, like those between South Hams and West Devon, will be expanded. None of the four existing councils have Housing Revenue Accounts which simplifies operational synergies.

This proposal forms part of a wider proposal to be submitted by East Devon District Council, North Devon District Council, Mid Devon District Council, South Hams District Council, Teignbridge District Council, Torridge District Council and West Devon Borough Council.

## **Barriers and challenges**

Within a largely rural county the potential for economic and housing growth can be limited and needs targeted support to unlock its potential. That support is most effectively provided by authorities with a firm understanding of place and local connection to its businesses and communities. We believe that a single Devon Unitary Authority is too large to deliver effective,



efficient services whilst ensuring that services are connected to place. Therefore, in developing proposals for multiple unitary authorities, careful consideration will need to be given to the potential for economic and housing growth which does not disadvantage the other unitary authorities. The long history of working together will be continued as proposals are finalised by November 2025.

This interim plan is viable on the basis that existing boundaries are maintained, in line with the Government's approach that existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for proposals. It also provides a solution for the entirety of Devon.

Whilst we would hope that the Government would seek to extend the current integrated health and care arrangements, there is a significant risk that Torbay's current integrated arrangements would not continue as part of this option leading to increased costs and poorer outcomes. Our community networks, which do so much to prevent residents from needing statutory services, risk being diluted, in particular if there is a reduced sense of identification with the place. The impact of such a breakdown would lead to the loss of millions of pounds of added value.

In working together, it is essential that the data held by Devon County Council on its upper tier functions is shared openly at the lowest possible level. This will help to ensure that the final proposals are based on accurate information about the needs to the populations and communities on the new authorities.

The potential impact, or otherwise, on the delivery of National Park Authority functions will need to be considered.

## **Boundary and ward implications**

The initial view is that between 4500 and 5000 electors per councillor will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of the area in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance.

In North Yorkshire (the largest in England by area (8,053 km<sup>2</sup>)) the average number of electors per councillor was 5,374 when formed in 2023. Cornwall had a ratio of 4,994 registered electors per councillor.

Cumberland, another new unitary, has a ratio of 4,569 registered electors per councillor. In general terms County Councils have higher levels of electors per Councillor. The average number of registered electorate per councillor for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in 2023 was 4,852. Locally Devon County Council in 2023 had 10,432 electors per Councillor.

In line with the above, a total of 230 to 250 councillors across all of Devon would improve the democratic representation by over 50% (compared to the existing Devon County Council figures) and allow councillors to continue to undertake effective decision making, scrutinise decisions and provide effective community leadership.

Based on the number of electors the Southern Devon Council would have between 65 and 73 councillors (with the corresponding Exeter and Northern Devon Council having between 108 and 120, and Plymouth City Council remaining at 57). However, both proposed authorities include

large rural areas that are characterised by dispersed populations. The analysis around democratic representation will continue to be refined to ensure that benchmarks for the geographical area being served are also considered.

## **Alignment with devolution ambitions**

The proposal for two new unitary authorities alongside the retention of Plymouth City Council, directly supports the Government's wider devolution ambitions. The existing eight district, one county (Devon) and one unitary (Torbay) councils would form into the two new authorities providing local representation, accountability and an effective service delivery platform for the future 'strategic' mayoral combined authority.

The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (CCA) was formally established on 5 February 2025 as part of the devolution deal for the area. The two proposed unitary authorities align to the same geography and can therefore work seamlessly to support the CCA.

Looking forward our preference is for a Mayoral Combined Authority serving the wider peninsular area including Plymouth and Cornwall. The proposed structure would again nest neatly within this wider geography with the MCA including voting representation from the four authorities. This would bring more equal voting representation per head of population than single large unitary with both proposed unitary authorities having a population that is more akin to the population current served by Cornwall Council (at circa 570,000 people).

## **Delivery governance and costs, plus future transformation opportunities**

We believe that, from Torbay Council's perspective, the indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team are expected to be circa £1,153,000 over a two-year period.

Initial independent financial analysis has been commissioned and consideration given to the potential costs and benefits by using various financial benchmarks. Given the uncertainty around the savings that have been achieved in previous unitary rounds, we have sought to stress-test these savings and cost assumptions. A reasonable estimate for savings is between £3.0 million and £4.5 million per district giving a range between £24 million and £36 million per annum.

## **Discounted Option: Single Devon Council (with or without Plymouth)**

With a population in excess of 1.25 million people distributed across 6,500 km<sup>2</sup>, the geographic County of Devon (including Plymouth and Torbay) is the fourth largest by area and 12th largest by population in England. Future changes to local governance structures and service delivery arrangements need to achieve the right balance of population size and economies of scale with the practicalities of the geography, culture, society and economy of Devon. Change should also reflect and enhance the communities that have developed under present boundaries whilst optimising efficiencies in service delivery.

Nationally, experience points to the fact that Devon is far too large to enable a single authority to be efficient and effective whilst retaining a sense of place and community. The largest existing unitary authority by land area, North Yorkshire, has a population of 627,000 just over half of

Devon's. Most unitary authorities are much smaller with populations between 100,000 and 300,000. The English Devolution White Paper sets a guiding principle for new councils of 500,000 but recognises that in certain scenarios this figure may not make sense for an area.

Whilst Torbay Council is the seventh smallest unitary in England, we have worked hard over many years to find sustainable, innovative solutions to the financial challenges that we have faced. The decisions which have been taken over recent years have meant that Torbay Council is not in the position of needing to identify substantial savings to balance its books.

Our Children's Services are good and our approach to integrated health and adult social care is recognised as a pathfinder. We are working effectively to stabilise the costs of temporary accommodation and to reduce homelessness. We are delivering against our Written Statement of Action for SEND and our Safety Valve agreement.

There is a significant risk that those most vulnerable in the Torbay community who rely on crucial services such as adult social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness will be negatively and disproportionately impacted if Torbay becomes part of a single Devon unitary council (with or without Plymouth).

## Local engagement

Following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024 and the subsequent receipt of the invitation to develop proposals for local government reorganisation on 5 February 2025, Leaders and Chief Executives across Devon have been in discussion about potential proposals. Discussions between all existing council leaders have been taking place. Whilst each council is submitting their initial plans, the development of proposals for local government reorganisation will need to be informed by a detailed evidence base that ensures that all relevant factors are taken into account.

Within Torbay, members of the Place Leadership Board, including the Police and Crime Commissioner, Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust, South Devon College and the English Riviera Business Improvement District Company, have discussed the Government's invitation and the potential options for inclusion in this interim plan. In summary, the Board's view was that Torbay Council's boundaries remaining the same would not be viable, and that, in terms of growing and expanding, that Options 2 and 3 are viable. It was felt that Torbay offers very different services compared to other areas and this is a strength. Trusted relationships, knowledge and understanding are already in place.

Discussions have been held with both of Torbay's Members of Parliament.

A public community engagement event has been held on 11 March 2025 with around 150 people in attendance. Again, the requests within the Government's invitation were explained as where the options under consideration. An opinion poll at the end of the event provided results in the table on the following page:

Option	1st Choice	%	2nd Choice	%	Total	Total %
Torbay Council's boundaries remain the same	65	58%	10	10.6%	75	36.4%
A new unitary authority covering Torbay, approx. half of South Hams and most of Teignbridge (i.e. covering the South Local Care Partnership of the NHS)	16	14.2%	52	55.4%	68	33.0%
The 1:4:5 Option – a new unitary authority covering the areas of Torbay, South Hams, West Devon and Teignbridge, plus a new unitary authority in the east and north of Devon and Plymouth remaining as is (or with a slightly enlarged border)	20	18%	24	25.5%	44	21.4%
A single unitary authority covering all of Devon (either with or without Plymouth)	11	9.8%	8	8.5%	19	9.2%
Totals	112	100%	94	100%	206	100%

Once feedback is received from Government on the interim plans submitted by the Devon local authorities, a cohesive approach to engagement across the whole of Devon will need to be determined and implemented. This will enable us to show how the councils in Devon have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.

We need to work across all existing local authorities across Devon to gather all of the necessary information in order to prepare an options appraisal for all councils to consider ahead of the deadline for the submission of final proposals at the end of November 2025.

## Current working groups

There is a long history of local partners working together proactively and collaboratively. This spans a wide range of activity from community safety to joint planning and formal shared service delivery. We fully expect future arrangements to adopt this same ethos.

Depending upon feedback to initial interim plans, we would anticipate a single grouping including representation from all of the Councils in Devon to provide oversight of the development of final proposals through to November 2025. Whilst we cannot guarantee that this would necessarily mean that all partners necessarily align behind a single preferred option, it would nonetheless ensure that all proposals are explored consistently including utilising the same data sets.