
Joint Submission from Exeter City Council and Plymouth City Council

Our proposal for Local Government
Reorganisation in Devon



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Local Government Reorganisation in Devon

Foreword

There are few places in the United Kingdom quite like Devon.

Proud, distinctive, full of character and potential. From the bustle of its cities to the calm of its coast and the deep steadiness of its rural heart, Devon carries an energy all of its own - confident yet grounded, modern yet shaped by centuries of history and belonging.

Plymouth and Exeter stand at the heart of that story – Plymouth is the powerhouse and growth hub of the South West and is relentlessly ambitious for its people and for its businesses. Exeter is a compact yet fast growing city with significant impact, helping to power Devon's growth while staying faithful to its people, communities and heritage.

This submission is jointly presented by Plymouth City Council and Exeter City Council and is underpinned by two separate annexes which describe the detailed analysis we have undertaken to reach this point. However, it is not a plan for our cities alone. It is a plan for Devon. A plan to strengthen what already works, to fix what does not, and to build a fairer, simpler, more logical way of structuring local government in this incredible county.

We have worked closely with other Devon Councils sharing data and engaged with partners and communities across Devon to create this proposal. Through hundreds of conversations, we heard the same message, time and again: people want decisions made closer to home, by those who know the places they serve. We see that every day in Exeter and Plymouth, in the success of local partnerships, in joined-up housing and regeneration, in the way decisions made locally, improve lives.

Our case for four unitary councils is compelling and evidence-based, but it is also proudly ambitious.

We want more for the communities in our cities, our county, and our country. More opportunity, more growth, and higher living standards for everyone who calls Devon home.

Our cities are where ideas grow, where businesses invest, where research, technology and innovation take root. Cities like Plymouth and Exeter have shown how creating jobs, skills, and prosperity can lift the whole region. But our countryside is just as vital. Its landscapes, its traditions, and its people define who we are and demands a different approach, one that values community over centralisation, care over convenience, place over process.

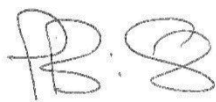
Our proposal unlocks the potential of our cities while protecting the special character of our rural and coastal places. It is bold but balanced, rooted in Devon's strengths and built to be sustainable. It offers savings, stability, and a platform for growth and innovation. It strengthens what works – from housing and regeneration to local services - and fixes what doesn't: the strain on care, the pressure on transport, the distance between decision-makers and the people they serve. Our proposal will provide four unitary councils that will have clearer lines of accountability, a stronger focus on the urban and rural communities they serve, stronger voices for local people and financial sustainability.

Plymouth City Council and Exeter City Council are proud to have jointly undertaken this work, which reflects cross party-political support. Our submission has resonated across Exeter, Plymouth and Devon – with our councils' political groups, civic partners and local community organisations – standing behind a shared belief in the important role of its two major cities in Devon's future.

Our shared vision is simple: a Devon where every child can thrive; where everyone has a home, feels safe and where no one is left behind. A Devon where services are designed around people, not bureaucracy. Where our cities drive growth and innovation and our rural and coastal communities keep their special character.

This is one of the most crucial periods in Devon's history. This is how we build a better, fairer, greener Devon – confident in its purpose, proud of its people, and ready for what comes next.

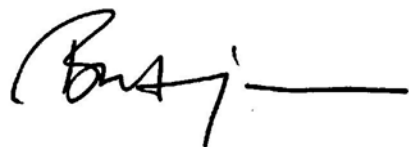
We invite the government to undertake a statutory consultation on our proposal.



Cllr Phil Bialyk
Leader, Exeter City Council



Cllr Tudor Evans
Leader Plymouth City Council



Bindu Arjoon
Chief Executive, Exeter City Council



Tracey Lee
Chief Executive, Plymouth City Council

Executive Summary

Four Councils, One Connected Devon

Four unitary councils, one connected Devon. We propose an expanded Exeter, an expanded Plymouth, an expanded Torbay, and a Devon Coast & Countryside unitary - four unitary councils aligned to functional economic areas in support of future devolution arrangements and the development of a South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority. Together, these authorities will establish a single tier of local government that reflects the natural economic geography and functional relationships of this important region. This model simplifies accountability, improves services, and offers financial viability and resilience, while protecting local identity. To achieve this, we request Ministerial approval for the boundary modifications required to deliver coherent and functional unitary areas for Devon.

This document summarises Plymouth City Council's and Exeter City Council's agreed case for four unitary councils and demonstrates how our proposal meets Government's criteria for local government reorganisation.

Introduction

Exeter City Council, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council have worked together and agree that a four unitary model is best for Devon. Whilst all three agree that Exeter and Plymouth's boundaries should be expanded, Torbay support retaining their current boundary and Exeter and Plymouth contend that, to achieve balance and sustainability, the boundaries of all three should be expanded. This Executive Summary presents Exeter City Council's and Plymouth City Council's submissions as a joint proposal. Torbay Council will be making their own submission.

This is a pivotal moment for Devon. Leaders from Plymouth and Exeter have come together to propose a new model of local government built around a simple principle: better services for residents, delivered by councils designed for the communities they serve.

For five decades, we have worked in a two-tier system, but now Devon has the chance to evolve. We are proposing transformation that delivers real benefits: empowered local voices, better accountability, and more efficient services. This change will also secure over £400 million in savings to support our communities over the next ten years.

The Proposal: Four Councils, One Connected Devon

The proposal creates four unitary councils across Devon, each designed to reflect how people live, work and use services:

Expanded Plymouth – based on the current Unitary Authority expanding to serve communities across the city and surrounding areas that already rely on Plymouth for employment, education and healthcare. A council with the scale to compete nationally and drive growth.

New and Expanded Exeter – a new Unitary Authority based on existing Exeter City District Council, expanding into the surrounding parishes to unlock the potential of one of Britain's fastest-growing cities, giving it the coherence and capacity to plan strategically for housing, transport and economic growth across its natural economic area.

Expanded Torbay – based on the current Unitary Authority proven success in delivering integrated services, from acclaimed children's services to innovative health partnerships but with an expanded boundary to include surrounding parishes.

New Devon Coast and Countryside - a new Unitary Authority specifically designed for rural and coastal communities, with services tailored to the challenges of dispersed, older, populations, market towns and isolated areas.

Why This Matters

The current two-tier system creates confusion. Residents struggle to know which council does what and sometimes fall between the gaps. Strategic decisions are fragmented across multiple organisations, creating inefficiency.

In future when residents need help with housing, social care, planning or education, they will know exactly which council to contact. Services will be integrated rather than divided. Strategic planning will happen at the right geographic scale, neither too distant nor too fragmented.

This is not simply structural change but a fundamental shift in how services are delivered. By creating a single tier of local government on refreshed boundaries, we create the conditions for genuine transformation, services designed around people rather than organisational convenience, earlier intervention that prevents problems escalating, and real integration where families currently experience fragmentation.

Stronger local voices

This proposal embeds local decision-making through the development of neighbourhood governance arrangements in every council. These are not token consultation exercises but genuine structures for community influence, bringing together parish councils, elected members, officers and local partners.

Unlocking growth and opportunity

Devon has enormous economic potential, from advanced manufacturing and marine technology to environmental science and the visitor economy. What holds us back is governance that fragments effort and creates barriers to strategic action.

Four unitary councils can act decisively. Housing development can be planned coherently across natural economic areas. Transport infrastructure can connect communities based on how people actually travel.

The proposal also creates the foundation for meaningful regional devolution. Four constituent councils will form a South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority, giving Devon a powerful voice at the national level and the ability to secure investment and influence policy.

The case for change: addressing critical challenges

Devon is a unique and compelling place to live, work, and visit - two coastlines, two national parks, and landscapes of international importance blended with important national industry, heritage, and cutting-edge technologies. The critical challenge we face across Devon is one of geography. Historic administrative boundaries constrain Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay's ability to extend across natural communities and functional economic areas, throttling their growth potential. The current district boundaries artificially divide the sphere of influence of each growth area, making it harder to deliver economic and housing growth. These three urban areas exist within an otherwise large and sparsely populated rural county of towns, villages and communities.

Devon has an ageing rural population placing huge pressure on public services, contains significant pockets of deprivation, a lack of affordable housing, skills gaps, low wages, and the migration of young people out of the rural areas. Our proposal is structured to address these challenges and avoid creating authorities with undue financial advantage or disadvantage, thus ensuring all areas benefit from appropriately allocated resources and that no community is left behind as Devon transitions to this new governance framework.

A compelling vision

Our vision is for a Devon that works for all our residents. A Devon where every child can thrive, where everyone has a home and feels safe, where no one is left behind; services are designed around people, not bureaucracies; our cities drive growth and innovation, and our rural and coastal communities keep their special character.

Local government is uniquely placed to coordinate and drive forward work and investment to bring this vision to life. But it requires a local government that is fit for purpose now and in the future.

Our modified proposal fully meets the government's criteria because it better aligns with how people live their lives, reflects travel to work and housing market areas, and enables services to be provided in ways that more proactively support growth, regeneration, access to health and social care.

Critically, the modified proposal delivers genuine public service reform by creating coherent geographies for service delivery that avoid fragmentation, reduce administrative duplication, and enable place-based models of care that integrate health and social care services around the needs of communities rather than administrative convenience.

As well as meeting the six criteria set by government, our proposal is built on two additional sets of local principles, developed and tested early-on in the process with local partners and stakeholders. They respond to the government’s requirement for a single tier of local government and equally importantly, they reflect what matters most for Devon’s future:

Plymouth City Council Principles for Devon.	Exeter City Council Principles
1. Any boundary changes for Devon will be appropriate for continuing and new unitary authorities to be financially viable and be of a population size that can deliver sustainable high-quality services to residents. 2. Any boundary change will retain the character and identity of the existing neighbourhoods across the whole Devon area. 3. Any boundary change will respect existing unitary county boundaries. 4. Any boundary change will minimise organisational impacts on National Park Authorities and National Landscapes. 5. Any boundary change will be based on existing parish boundaries. 6. Any boundary change will have regard to the requirements for future sustainable growth reflecting the unique growth opportunities in each of the proposed unitary authorities.	1. Supporting growth, housing, transport and connectivity 2. Addressing the different needs of urban and rural communities 3. Making public services easier to access and navigate. 4. Strengthening local identity, place and community voice 5. Creating a balanced and coherent population and service footprint 6. Ensuring financial sustainability and value for taxpayers.

These principles have guided our evidence-led work to define the future local geographical structure for Devon. They provide the basis for a structure that is practical, locally grounded and capable of delivering better outcomes for residents.

Why Exeter Should Become a Unitary Authority on an Expanded Boundary

Exeter is the economic driver of Devon, home to a world-class Russell Group university, the Met Office, and a thriving knowledge economy. It leads nationally in climate science and environmental intelligence, positioning itself as a global innovation hub. With strong infrastructure, high productivity, and one of the UK's fastest-growing travel-to-work areas, Exeter is forecast to exceed £5.5bn GVA, ranking among the top ten UK cities for economic growth.

Despite these strengths, Exeter's potential is constrained by outdated governance and boundaries. The current two-tier system fragments decision-making, limits fiscal autonomy, and prioritises rural agendas over urban dynamism. This has resulted in missed opportunities, such as the collapse of the Greater Exeter Local Plan and exclusion from key enterprise zone decisions. Without strategic restructure, Exeter risks overheating, facing housing shortages, transport strain, and labour gaps while surrounding areas underperform.

Creating a new unitary council aligned with Exeter's functional geography will unlock coordinated planning for housing, transport, and infrastructure. It will enable strategic investment across high-growth areas like Cranbrook, Skypark, and Exmouth, supporting clean growth, climate resilience, and nature recovery. This model will strengthen Exeter's role as a regional connector and gateway to the South West, leveraging its exceptional connectivity via the M5, high-speed rail links, and international airport.

Exeter's youthful, highly skilled population, combined with its innovation clusters in advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, and life sciences, offers a unique platform for inclusive growth. A unitary authority will provide the scale and powers needed to accelerate investment, deliver sustainable housing, and retain talent, ensuring Exeter continues to drive prosperity for the whole of Devon.

Why Plymouth should continue as a Unitary Authority on an Expanded Boundary

Plymouth's innovative strategic planning approach through the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan already demonstrates the successful collaboration which is possible across Plymouth and the communities of the South Hams. The expanded council will deliver integrated and effective local governance to the people of Plymouth and the surrounding areas that already naturally function as part of the Plymouth housing and economic area. As a continuing authority, Plymouth will be uniquely positioned to seamlessly integrate services across the extended area from day one, bringing proven excellence in children's services, adult social care, and integrated health partnerships to a wider community.

Plymouth City Council has an excellent track record of financial management and sustained improvements to critical statutory services including adult and children's social care services. This is down to a relentless focus on putting outcomes for residents first, using transformative and innovative approaches to make the city's services better. Working at pace, with high energy and a mindset of continual improvement.

The expanded Plymouth will be equipped to provide enhanced service delivery achieved through the integration of services currently divided between county and district councils, leading to more cohesive and efficient operations.

Why Torbay should continue as a Unitary Authority on an Expanded Boundary

The four unitary model reflects the distinct needs of different parts of Devon. Torbay faces the highest levels of deprivation, with significant concentrations of areas in the most deprived national deciles, coupled with higher levels of child poverty and lower life expectancy. This requires tailored, intensive support models. Torbay Council has an established and innovative integrated health and social care partnership with the NHS and has a track record of continuous service improvement including currently being the only council in Devon with Children's Services rated as Good. On an expanded boundary Torbay can continue to develop and expand its tailored services for its coastal and wider rural community and ageing demographic. The expansion provides a sustainable financial future and population size; balanced enough to stand financial shocks and provide Torbay with an equitable voice at the strategic planning table.

Why a New Coastal and Countryside Unitary Authority

The new Devon authority will focus on the distinct challenges of dispersed rural communities, including rural poverty, low wages, and pressures around housing affordability and connectivity. This differentiated approach ensures that public services can be designed and delivered in ways that genuinely respond to local circumstances rather than applying uniform models that work nowhere well.

The four unitary model creates a robust local government structure that serves both current and future generations, with the agility to embrace innovation whilst adapting to changing priorities. By eliminating artificial administrative boundaries that currently divide naturally connected communities, this proposal creates clear accountability, improves service delivery, and unlocks significant opportunities for housing growth and economic development.

How Our Four Unitary Model Delivers

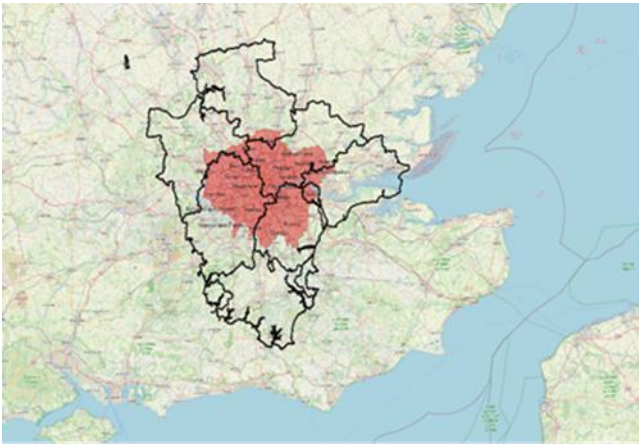
Our Modified Proposal for Devon strikes the right balance to make the most of the once-in-a-generation opportunity to create local government for Devon that is firmly:

- **Rooted in place and delivering better outcomes** - focused on distinct places and able to better manage resources, attract investment and deliver value for money.
- **Based on real places and economies** - functional geographies that support growth and accountability.
- **Built on fair, sustainable finances** - based on a fair and balanced tax base to support financial resilience and aligned governance.
- **Wrapped around communities** – giving them a real voice in decisions through local neighbourhood committees and stronger democratic representation.
- **Protecting our environment** - from our coasts to cities, towns and villages, to our countryside.
- **Providing simpler, smarter, public services that work better for people** – reducing duplication and complexity, delivering better decision making and improved customer experiences.
- **Practical, phased and ready to deliver** - ensuring a logical flow into effective new authorities, with shared strategic need and value placed on working together.

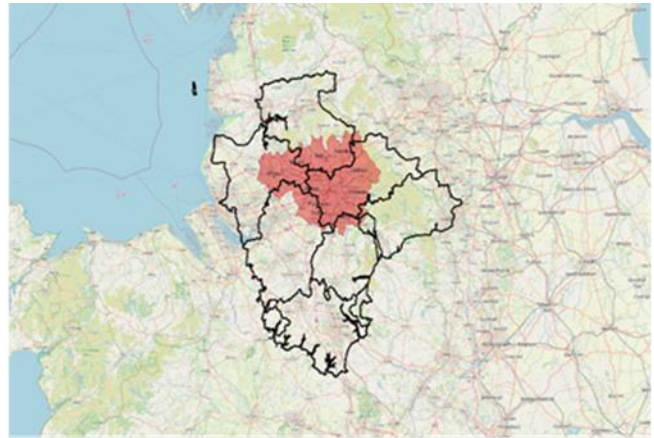
Devon in Context

To understand our proposals, it is important to recognise what Devon's urban areas actually represent in national context. Plymouth, at approximately 270,000 people, is comparable in size to Sunderland or Southampton. Exeter, at approximately 135,000 within its current boundaries, is comparable to Carlisle or Lancaster and Torbay is larger than places like Eastbourne, Hastings, and Worthing.

Yet Devon's geography is such that these substantial urban settlements are embedded within a county that, if you removed them entirely, would still cover 6,700 square kilometres with a population of over 600,000. To put that in perspective, Devon is more than four times larger than Greater London and more than five times larger than Greater Manchester.



Greater London (Red) made up of 33 Councils ranging in population size from 143,000 to 409,000



Greater Manchester (Red) made up of 10 Councils ranging in population size from 198,000 to 630,000

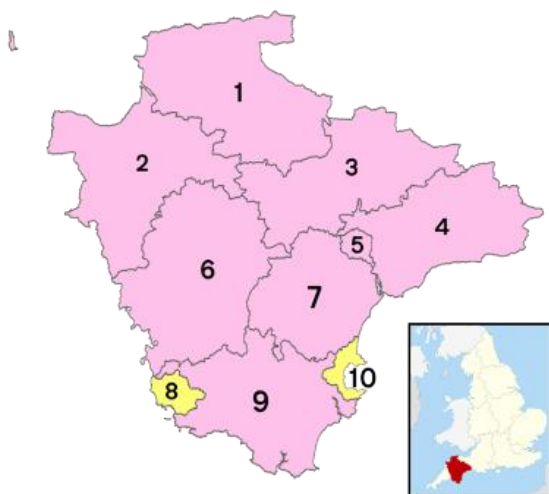
The right option for Devon

The existing two-tier structure of local government creates artificial barriers in areas that naturally function as part of our two urban regions. The division of responsibilities between county and district councils' fragments service delivery, particularly for vulnerable residents who require coordinated support across multiple services. Families with children who have special educational needs, older people requiring both health and social care, and young people transitioning from children to adult services all face unnecessary complexity navigating between different tiers of local government. These administrative boundaries frustrate residents and delay solutions to cross-boundary issues such as housing delivery, transport planning, and economic development.

Businesses struggle to identify the right council to engage with on economic development matters across the economic area, whilst residents face confusion about service responsibilities between different tiers of government. The artificial division of naturally connected communities like Sherford and Cranbrook and other urban fringe areas undermines effective strategic planning and service delivery. Meanwhile, the duplication of corporate services across 11 separate councils represents a significant waste of public resources that could be redirected to front-line provision.

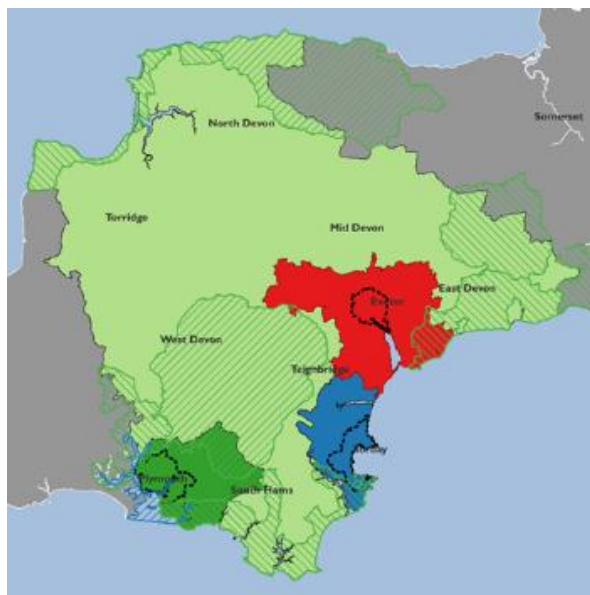
Our proposal is for four new unitary councils centred in the urban centres of Plymouth and Exeter and the coastal towns of Torbay, and one that brings the coast and countryside together. By creating councils that are clearly focused on the needs and challenges of their places and aligned with the functional economic geography of the county, we are putting in place firm foundations for the future. Councils can balance future growth, development, conservation, engagement, collaboration and service delivery across geographies that make sense for local people, businesses and communities and the way people lead their lives. The new councils would work alongside each other a future South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority, ensuring coherence between local delivery and strategic priorities for growth, skills, transport, and climate action.

From 11 councils (eight district councils, two unitary councils and one county council)



Key:
 Existing District Councils (Pink)
 Plymouth Unitary Council (Yellow – 8)
 Torbay Unitary Council (Yellow – 10)

To four unitary authorities on modified boundaries:



Key:
 New Unitary for Expanded Exeter (Red)
 Expanded Plymouth (Dark Green)
 Expanded Torbay (Blue)
 New Devon Coast and Countryside Unitary (Light Green)
 National Park and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Green Hatch)
 National Marine Park (Blue Hatch)

Modified boundaries to enable growth, not constrain it

These foundations cannot be built on our existing administrative geography; one designed over 50 years ago. Our current district boundaries do not neatly aggregate into functional socio-economic areas. It is a geography that bakes in significant constraints to the future growth and prosperity of the county, locking in inefficiencies and cost inequalities that could otherwise be released.

Nowhere is this more pertinent than with the current boundaries around the three urban areas that are too tight to facilitate sustainable growth and funding. Our proposal therefore requires new boundaries to be drawn, based not on existing district and unitary boundaries but on parishes.

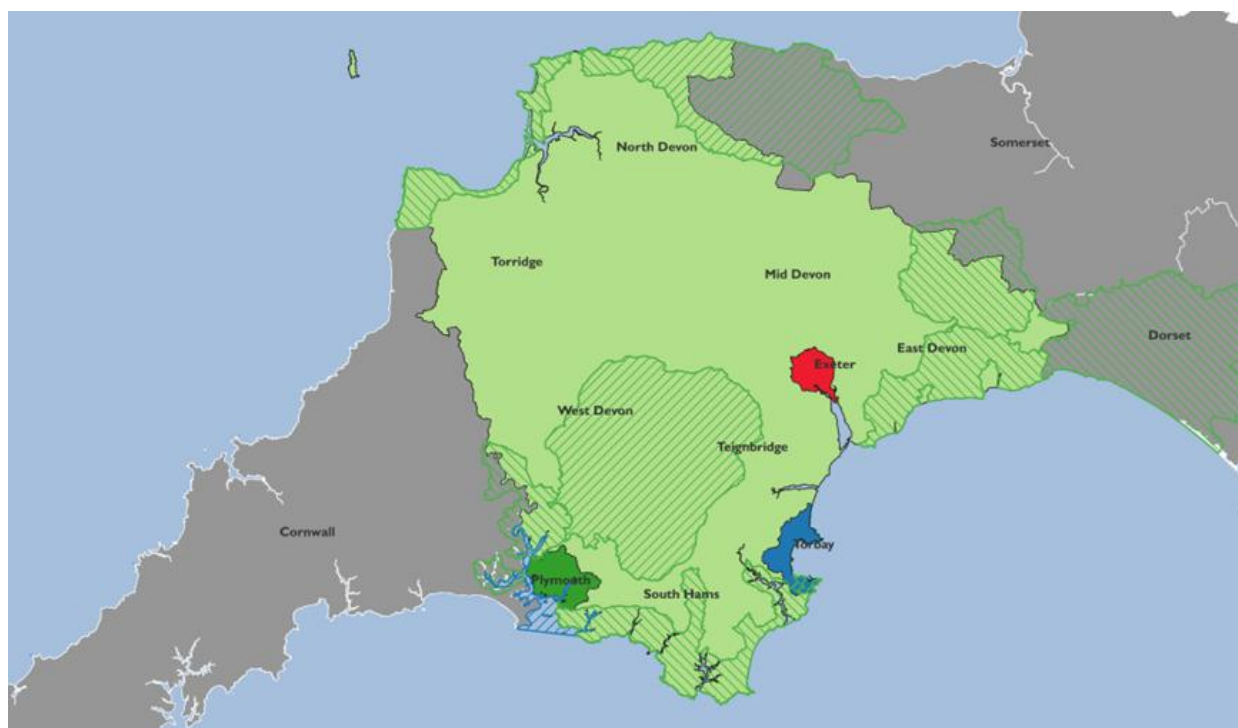
In drawing these new boundaries, we recognise the environmental significance and value of Devon's landscapes. Our engagement with communities in the areas proposed for expansion heard clearly how much residents cherish their green spaces and coastal environments. The proposed boundaries respect these valued landscapes whilst creating the functional geography needed for sustainable growth. This approach balances the need for urban areas to grow with protecting the natural environment that makes Devon such an extraordinary place to live and work.

The Baseline Proposal for Local Government in Devon

Our Baseline Proposal reflects the rural nature of Devon and champion's the distinctive urban character of Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay. It meets the requirements of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and compares favourably with the Governments' six criteria set out the Secretary of State's invitation issued on 05 February 2025 (and taking account of the feedback to the Devon system set out in the letter of 15 May 2025).

Our baseline case for local government reorganisation in Devon is as follows:

- **Plymouth City Council** a continuing unitary authority with a population of approximately 272,000 based on its existing unitary council boundary.
- **Exeter City Council** a new unitary authority with a population of approximately 138,000 based on its existing administrative boundary.
- **Torbay Council** a continuing unitary authority with a population of approximately 140,000 based on its existing unitary council boundary.
- **Devon Coast and Countryside Council** a new unitary council with a population of approximately 703,000 based on its existing county boundary, excluding the City of Exeter.



Plymouth
Torbay
Exeter
Devon



National Parks
National Marine Park
National Landscapes
Existing Boundaries

This provides a workable single tier of local government for Devon but is not our final proposal. This is because it is not financially viable, it does not reflect natural communities, nor does it address the growth potential of our cities which is currently hampered by historical boundaries. Full detailed analysis and supporting evidence from Exeter City Council can be found in Annexe 1, with Plymouth City Council's analysis provided in Annexe 2.

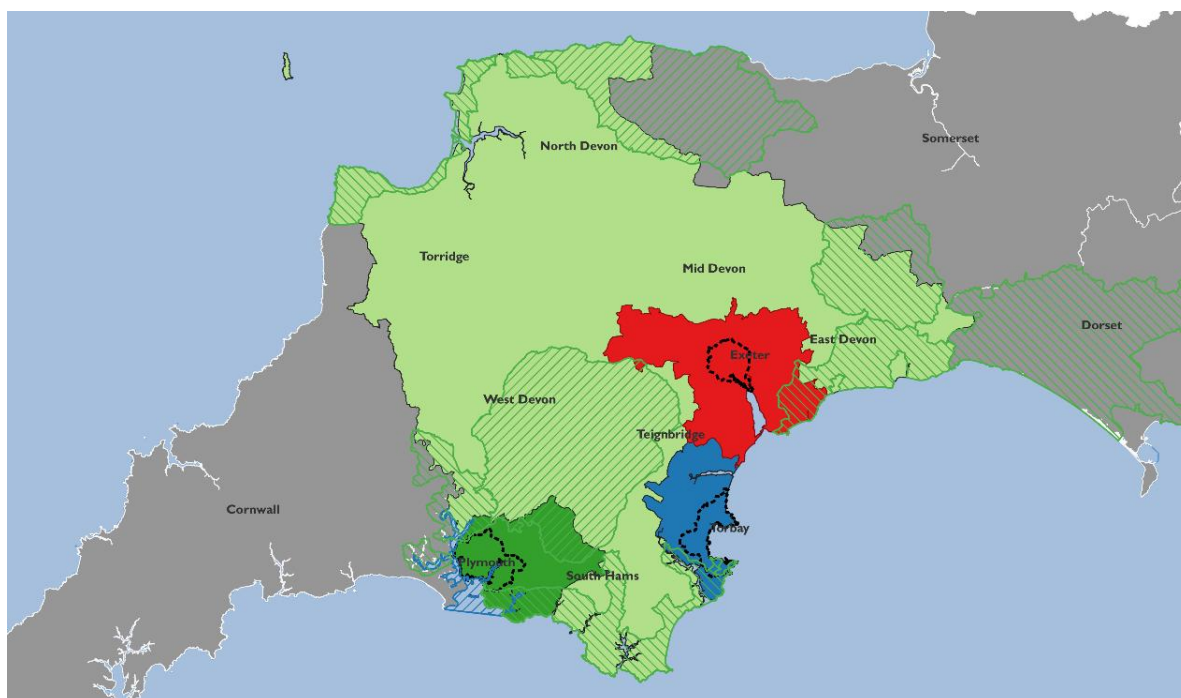
The Modified Proposal for Local Government in Devon:

Four Councils, One Connected Devon

Our Modified Proposal establishes a single tier of local government that reflects the natural economic geography and functional relationships of Devon. We embrace the opportunity to reorganise local government in Devon into natural communities and cohesive localities that present clear opportunities to improve outcomes for all residents across Devon.

Our Modified Proposal groups existing principal authorities into four unitary councils with changes to existing districts. We request a Ministerial modification to our base case proposal. Our proposal, which reflects our vision for local government, is for there to be 4 unitary councils covering the Devon area as follows:

- **An expanded Plymouth Council** – comprising the unitary council of Plymouth City Council as a continuing authority with a population of approximately 272,000 with a Ministerial modification to include 13 parishes all within the current district of South Hams District Council of resulting in a population of approximately 305,000.
- **An expanded Exeter Council** – comprising a new unitary council based on the current Exeter City Council boundary with population of approximately 138,000 with a Ministerial modification to extend this with 15 parishes from within Teignbridge District Council, 28 parishes from within East Devon District Council and 6 parishes from within Mid-Devon District Council resulting in a population of approximately 260,000.
- **An expanded Torbay Council** – comprising the unitary council of Torbay as a continuing authority on its existing boundaries with a population of approximately 140,000 with a modification comprising of 22 parishes from within Teignbridge District Council and South Hams District Council resulting in a population of 232,000.
- **A Devon Coast and Countryside Council** – comprising a new unitary council covering the rest of the former Devon County Council area, resulting in a population of approx. 455,000.



Expanded Plymouth
Expanded Torbay
Expanded Exeter
Devon Coast and
Countryside



National Parks
National Marine Park
National Landscapes
Existing District
Boundaries

This structure recognises that Devon is not one homogenous place. Urban centres drive economic growth and innovation. Rural and coastal areas require specialist understanding and tailored services.

Headline data profile	Exeter	Plymouth	Torbay	Devon Coast and Countryside
Population	260,195	305,731	232,697	455,883
Projected population growth to 2040	114%	105%	110%	114%
Council Tax band D average	2,001	1,965	1,983	2,014
Council Tax band D maximum	2,040	1,998	2,004	2,071
Council Tax base	88,439	90,449	82,356	182,395
Council Tax Base per unit of population	2.90	3.32	2.67	2.44
Council Tax income per unit of population	690	591	742	825

This modified proposal meets the requirements of the Government's criteria as follows –

Four Unitary Model Government Criteria Assessment		
Criteria	Assessment	Rationale
1. Single tier of local government		• Creates a single tier of local government in Devon, removing the existing two-tier arrangements. • Reflects the true nature of place. • Aligns with functional economic areas and housing market areas reflecting the true nature of Devon enabling the planning, investment and infrastructure decisions to be made coherently across the wider area. 1a) Sensible Economic Areas: Aligns with functional economic geography. Expanded Plymouth's boundary encompasses the Plymouth Housing Market Area and Plymouth Travel to Work Area, including 13 South Hams parishes functionally integrated through commuting, education and service patterns. Expanded Exeter captures the wider Exeter functional economic area including the 49 surrounding parishes reflecting the Strategic housing market Area and Exeter Travel to Work Area. Torbay's modified boundary creates the appropriate scale for sustainable growth aligned with the Bay's natural geography. Devon Coast & Countryside would govern integrated rural and coastal economies with market towns and their natural hinterlands united within coherent planning areas. This creates appropriate tax base distribution aligned with economic geography rather than administrative history. 1b) Sensible Geography: Enables coherent planning for growth. Expanded Plymouth expansion from 79.9 km² to 358.7 km² provides geographic capacity for housing delivery aligned with the Plymouth Growth Area. Expanded Exeter to 605 km² similarly provides capacity to accommodate growth within functionally coherent boundaries. Torbay's modified boundary enables sustainable growth aligned with the bay's development capacity and infrastructure. Devon Coast & Countryside would enable coherent strategic planning across integrated rural and coastal economies, with market towns and their hinterlands planned together rather than fragmented across multiple district boundaries.

		1c) Clear Structure: Creates single tier removing two-tier arrangements. Each unitary scaled appropriately for effective service delivery with clear accountability. Aligns governance structures with functional economic geography, and strategic partnerships enabling coordinated planning, investment and infrastructure decisions.
2. Right size and financial resilience		• The expansion of Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter provides the planning capacity for sustainable growth - critically absent in the Base Case- unlocking the region's potential. • Reduction of the number of councils from 11 to 4 delivers efficiency savings through the rationalisation of senior roles and governance and consolidation of systems and estates. • Delivering essential services on specific needs of urban and rural communities creates opportunities to address higher unit costs in the current county area. • Tax base of each authority is sustainable and large enough to resist financial shocks. • Creates nationally significant, growth orientated unitary councils with balanced populations. 2a) Population Target: All authorities achieve an enhanced viable scale: Plymouth 300k, Torbay 220k, Exeter 260k which provide strengthened resilience. Devon Coast & Countryside at 445k is also of a viable scale to deliver rural services. 2b) Rationale for Sub-500k: Expansion provides planning capacity for sustainable growth. Expanded Plymouth's 12.4% population increase (270k to 301k) and Expanded Torbay's 57.7% increase (140k to 220k) and Expanded Exeter's by 90% (145k to 260k) creates more viable authorities whilst maintaining appropriate governance scale for Devon's settlement pattern without diluting urban character through excessive rural incorporation. 2c) Efficiencies: Plymouth expansion provides 18.15% increase in tax base (13,891 Band D properties). Exeter expansion more than doubles delivering significant tax base growth to support

		strategic investment. Torbay expansion delivers 67.2% tax base growth. Devon Coast & Countryside retains sufficient scale and tax base to operate efficiently, with the modified boundaries strengthening rather than compromising its financial sustainability. Financial modelling projects payback within three years, with cumulative savings of over £400m over 10 years. 2d) Managing Transition Costs: Total transition costs £70.1m over four years. Plymouth £4.9m generates over £6m annual benefits. Transition costs manageable: Exeter & Parishes/Devon Coast & Countryside £55.0m, Plymouth £4.9m, Torbay £10.2m. Authorities have sufficient reserves, usable balances analysis demonstrates capacity to manage transition. 2e) Best Value: Financial viability modelling demonstrates positive outcomes across all four authorities. Devon Coast & Countryside: £7.7m surplus (1.5%), Exeter: £4.6m surplus (1.4%), Plymouth: £2.8m surplus (0.8%), Torbay: £2.8m surplus (1.0%). All authorities achieve viable positions compared with Base Case where Plymouth shows £3.6m gap and Exeter £24.8m gap. Enhanced financial resilience enables investment in preventative services and transformation.
3. High-quality, sustainable services		• Creates a coherent service geography for school admissions, transport, skills, and social care. • Maximises opportunities for growth and simplifies residents' access to services. • Establishment of single tier local government removes duplication and confusion of service delivery. • Maximises opportunities to maintain service continuity especially in the areas of SEND and children and adults' social care yet also offers a catalyst for much needed change. • Creates opportunity to design services around the specific needs of urban and rural populations. • Creates coherent service geography based on a new localised, place-based model in either urban or rural areas.

		• Reduces administrative duplication. Provides significant service transformation opportunities. • Enables strategic planning to be better coordinated within the South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority. • Energises strategic relationships with NHS. 3a) Improved Structures: Expanded boundaries enable targeted service improvements. Plymouth's population increase from 272k to 305k provides enhanced capacity for specialist services whilst maintaining core demographic profile. Exeter's population increase from 138k to 260k provides scale for strategic investment and service development. Torbay's population increase from 140k to 232k strengthens financial sustainability for service improvement. Devon Coast & Countryside with a population of 455k is of sufficient scale for effective service delivery across rural and coastal geographies. Financial viability modelling shows Plymouth achieving surplus of £2.8m compared with Base Case gap of £3.6m: Exeter achieving a surplus of £4.6m compared with the Base Gap of £24.8m. Torbay a surplus of £2.8m compared to a £0.2m surplus in the base case and Coast and Countryside a surplus of 7.7m compared to surplus of £43.5 m in the base case The alignment with functional economic areas enables better partnership working with health, police and other agencies at neighbourhood level, with services organised around how people actually live rather than administrative boundaries. 3b) Public Service Reform: Larger scale enables improved commissioning efficiency. Torbay's expansion from 140k to 220k strengthens commissioning capacity whilst maintaining proven integrated care models. Enhanced financial positions across all four authorities (all showing surpluses rather than gaps) support system transformation. 3c) Impacts on Crucial Services: Enhanced financial viability enables investment in crucial services. Moving from funding gaps in base model (Plymouth £3.6m, Exeter £24.8m) to surpluses (Plymouth £2.8m, Exeter £4.6m) provides capacity for children's services, SEND provision, and preventative services investment.
--	--	---

4. Local collaboration and responsiveness		• A Four Unitary Model is supported by two existing unitary authorities and Exeter City Council. • Provides for recognised and legally coherent administrative boundaries which reflect settlement patterns and functional economic relationships. • Extensions based on building blocks of Parish and Town Councils. • Builds on existing good partnerships and relationships with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, business and the wider public sector. 4a) Meaningful and constructive local engagement: Plymouth ran 19 facilitated events with 489 attendees, two surveys with 824 responses and 17 stakeholder meetings. Exeter conducted representative surveys with over 2,000 respondents, webinars with 49 town and parish councils and focus groups and reach into 65,000+ homes and businesses whilst ten of eleven Devon councils shared a broad engagement questionnaire receiving over 8,000 combined responses. 4b) Issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance: Engagement revealed strong emotional connections to local areas with residents emphasising preservation of distinct community identities, from South Hams rural character to Torbay's coastal heritage, Plymouth's maritime identity and Exeter's centuries of civic history requiring Charter Trustees to maintain ceremonial functions. 4c) Evidence of local engagement and addressing concerns: The proposal responds through Neighbourhood Area Committees (or similar) co-designed with communities, strengthened parish council roles with no boundary changes, and an incremental approach addressing concerns about representation, rural identity and avoiding imposed top-down structures.

5. Support for devolution		There would be balanced population ratios between constituent authorities of a new South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority. 5a, 5b, 5c: Creates a group of balanced constituent authorities to link into a South West Peninsula (MSA). The balanced nature ensures fair representation and effective collaboration at the MSA level.
6. Community engagement		• Enables a Local Government Boundary Commission review of ward boundaries to be undertaken after Vesting Day. • Protects existing parish and town council arrangements. • Enables existing partnerships to form the basis of Neighbourhood Networks, ensuring further community empowerment. 6a) Plans to ensure communities are engaged: Neighbourhood Area Committees will be co-designed with communities through an incremental approach, supported by comprehensive training for staff and councillors, enhanced parish partnership agreements and dedicated neighbourhood teams with devolved budgets funded through efficiency savings and developer contributions. 6b) Existing arrangements enabling strong community engagement: Exeter will build on thirteen years of proven Wellbeing Exeter partnership and thriving VCSE sector, Plymouth will extend existing voluntary sector partnerships and community engagement practice across the enlarged authority, whilst Torbay will strengthen its long-established Community Partnerships network supported by Place Leadership Board and Community Builders employing strengths-based approaches.

What This Delivers for Communities

Our Modified Proposal reflects the things that matter to local people:

- **For residents in Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay:** councils with the scale and capacity to compete nationally, to drive economic growth, to deliver the housing young people need, and to coordinate investment in transport and infrastructure.
- **For Devon Coast and Countryside residents:** a dedicated council that understands the specific challenges of dispersed populations, the vital role of market towns, and the importance of maintaining services across difficult geography. Not an afterthought to urban priorities, but the entire focus of Devon Coast and Countryside authority.
- **For families needing support:** integrated services that wrap around them rather than passing them between organisations. Whether families need help with housing, social care, education or health, one council manages your support with a clear line of accountability. This represents a fundamental cultural shift from organisational silos to person-centred delivery, where coordination happens behind the scenes rather than being the responsibility of vulnerable families to navigate.
- **For businesses:** faster planning decisions, coordinated economic development support, and infrastructure investment that reflects how businesses actually operate across economic areas rather than administrative boundaries.
- **For young people:** councils with the capacity to deliver the homes, jobs and opportunities needed to build a life in Devon rather than being forced to leave for cities elsewhere.

A System Designed for Today, Built for Tomorrow

The current two-tier system was created in 1974. Since then, the world has changed fundamentally. Populations have aged dramatically, placing unprecedented pressure on social care. Technology has transformed how we communicate and access services. Climate change has created new challenges for our coast and countryside. Economic patterns have shifted, with cities becoming engines of growth while rural areas face different pressures.

This proposal creates a system designed for the realities of 2025 and beyond. It recognises that different types of communities need different approaches. It creates the scale needed for financial resilience and strategic capacity while maintaining the local focus that keeps decision-making close to residents. It builds in the flexibility needed to adopt new technologies, new ways of working, and new models of service delivery.

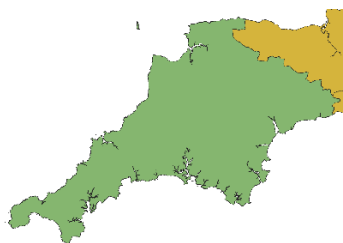
The four unitary model will create the conditions for transformation: better use of technology, investment in prevention rather than crisis response, integration of services around people rather than organisational convenience. Removing the artificial barriers of the two-tier system and historic boundaries enables a cultural change in how councils work, shifting from defensive boundary protection to collaborative problem-solving, from crisis management to early intervention, from fragmented contact to joined-up support.

The evidence is clear that the most vulnerable residents suffer most from fragmentation. This structure provides a catalyst to turbo-charge improvements in Children's Services and maintain a focus on improving Adult Social Care across Devon. A young person with complex needs

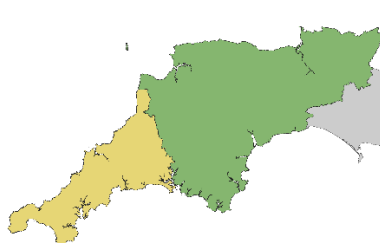
transitioning from children to adult services requires sustained relationships and coordinated support across education, health, social care, housing and employment. When these functions sit in different organisations, transitions become transactional handovers rather than supported journeys. Unitary authorities enable the cultural shift needed to deliver genuinely person-centred care.

Partnership working across organisational boundaries

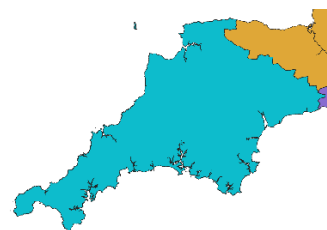
Current arrangements for public service partners are complex. Devon and Cornwall Police operate across two counties. Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service spans two counties. NHS Devon and Cornwall Integrated Care Board have now clustered to enable coverage across the Devon and Cornwall peninsula. This mixed geography makes coherent partnership working difficult when local government operates across thirteen different authorities.



Devon and Cornwall ICB Cluster (Green)



Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (Green)



Devon and Cornwall Police (Blue)

The four unitary structure creates clarity. Each authority becomes a defined place for partnership planning, able to work with health, police, fire and voluntary sectors at neighbourhood level where services actually connect with communities. The modified boundaries align more closely with these partnership geographies and enable genuine place-based integration. Rather than fragmenting effort across multiple district councils or operating at county scale too distant from communities, services can be designed around how people live. This matters for integrated care, community safety partnerships, early help for families and prevention programmes where effective delivery depends on agencies working together in defined localities.

Primary Benefits: Why Four unitary Councils Works for Devon

Our proposal releases a wide range of significant benefits for the people and businesses of Devon. It:

- **Provides a credible solution to Devon's unique mix of coastal, urban and dispersed communities** – reflecting functional economic geographies and enabling tailored responses to distinct urban and rural challenges.
- **Empowers Plymouth, Exeter, and Torbay** to lead on urban priorities and grow as service centres for their surrounding communities, unlocking their potential for economic and housing growth.
- **Empowers the new Coast and Countryside** authority to focus on the distinct needs of dispersed, rural market towns and villages – the unique challenges of coastal, moorland, and agricultural communities – while protecting their special character.
- **Fixes what does not work** – such as the strain on social care, the pressure on transport, the distance between decision-makers and the people they serve - by enabling each new unitary to drive service innovation and transformation appropriate for its context.
- **Offers savings and financial stability** with a balanced and sustainable tax base that avoids undue advantage or disadvantage for any area.
- **Ensures parishes and towns are kept whole**, with no principal settlement split, preserves local civic and community identity, and simplifies and clarifies local democratic accountability.
- **Reflects the feedback from our extensive public engagement**. Key themes included preserving distinct community identities, decision making closer to communities; better joined up services especially for children and families; vulnerable adult and older people; more opportunities to be involved in decision making; protecting green spaces, coast and rural character, more accessible public transport and more affordable homes.
- **Empowers local communities and strengthens community engagement** through the creation of new neighbourhood area committees, allowing greater levels of community representation and influence on local decision making.
- **Is fit for the future**, ensuring Devon continues to grow and develop because of its administrative geography, not despite it.

Financial sustainability with fiscal balance

Each authority achieves viable financial position with balanced tax base. Plymouth moves from £3.6m funding gap to £2.8m surplus. Exeter moves from £24.8m gap to £4.6m surplus. Torbay achieves £2.8m surplus. Devon Coast and Countryside shows £7.7m surplus. This is not marginal improvement but fundamental shift from structural deficit to sustainable operations.

The expansion delivers substantial tax base growth where needed. Plymouth gains 18.15% increase (13,891 Band D properties). Torbay gains 67.2% increase. Exeter gains significant capacity for strategic investment. Devon Coast and Countryside retains sufficient scale with strengthened rather than compromised sustainability. The balanced distribution avoids creating wealthy urban authorities at the expense of impoverished rural councils, or vice versa.

Scale for complexity without losing connection to communities

Each authority reaches viable scale for complex services while maintaining democratic proximity. Plymouth at 305,000 provides enhanced capacity for specialist functions whilst keeping the core urban character. Exeter at 260,000 gains strategic investment capability. Torbay at 232,000 strengthens commissioning while maintaining proven integrated care approaches. Devon Coast and Countryside at 445,000 achieves sufficient scale for effective rural service delivery.

This matters for adult social care, children's services and SEND provision where current arrangements fragment support across organisational boundaries. Single-tier authorities can integrate early help, statutory intervention and specialised support. They can commission at scale for efficiency whilst tailoring delivery to local needs. They can build genuine partnerships with health, police and voluntary sectors without coordination across multiple tiers. The modified boundaries align these service footprints with NHS geographies, policing areas and actual community networks.

The structure also enables investment in prevention. Moving from funding gaps to surpluses provides capacity for early intervention that reduces demand. Authorities can shift resources upstream, supporting families before crisis, addressing housing issues before homelessness, tackling health determinants before acute need. Current two-tier fragmentation makes this nearly impossible.

Strategic capability for growth and infrastructure

The expanded boundaries provide geographic capacity for housing delivery aligned with growth areas. Plymouth expansion enables the Plymouth Growth Area strategy. Exeter expansion provides capacity to accommodate development within functionally coherent boundaries. Torbay's modified boundary enables sustainable growth aligned with development capacity and infrastructure. Devon Coast and Countryside enables coherent strategic planning across integrated rural economies.

Single-tier planning removes the structural barrier where district councils grant permission, but county councils provide infrastructure. Housing, transport and employment can be planned together across functional areas. Strategic infrastructure investment can be coordinated with development phasing. Employment land can be allocated where workers live and travel patterns support access.

This also creates credible devolution partners. The four authorities will form a South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority with enhanced powers for spatial planning, infrastructure coordination, housing delivery, skills development and climate resilience. A future MSA would integrate transport networks, coordinate housing and regeneration, drive skills development for key sectors, support health integration, and advocate nationally for infrastructure investment. The differentiated approach unified by strategic collaboration provides strong basis for Spatial Development Strategy to achieve national growth ambitions whilst respecting distinct character of urban, coastal and rural Devon.

Democracy, accountability and community voice

The structure creates clarity about who is responsible for what. Residents will know which council to contact for housing, social care, planning or education. Services are integrated rather than divided. Strategic decisions happen at appropriate scale without fragmentation.

Each authority commits to neighbourhood governance arrangements that embed local decision-making. Co-designed with local people these are not token structure but genuine opportunities for community influence, bringing together parish councils, elected members, officers and local partners. This addresses consistent feedback that communities want decisions made closer to home by people who understand their areas.

The model also protects what makes Devon distinctive. The three urban authorities can drive innovation and growth as service centres for surrounding communities. Devon Coast and Countryside can focus on distinct needs of dispersed rural market towns and villages, addressing unique challenges of coastal, moorland and agricultural communities while protecting their special character. Services are designed around people and place rather than administrative convenience. No principal settlement is split. Parish and town boundaries are preserved. Local civic and community identity remains intact.

These changes will create simpler, stronger, and more strategic local government. It will allow us to extend our best and most effective services to more people, delivering better outcomes and creating a healthier, more prosperous future for every resident in Devon.

Putting People First in Devon: Pillars for Change		
Tackling local challenges	Developing locally owned solutions	Evidenced and insight-led practice
Creating solutions in each locality that focus on prevention and the strengths and assets of local communities.	Strategies and plans define a clear agenda and encourage local action.	Integrating data to build rich pictures of local communities to better target demand and understand need.
Delivering	Strengthening	Collaborating
Effective place-based services: where services are tailored to local population needs and council footprints.	Neighbourhood and community support: where trust relationships and prevention are built.	At the right scale to ensure sustainability, specialism or strategic coherence.

Our vision is for joined-up person-centred services delivering a simpler customer experience that will offer:

- **A stronger citizen voice** - feedback, comments and complaints will be captured in a consistent way meaning this will have a louder voice in service improvement.
- **A single citizen view** - by bringing data from across systems to enable more efficient interactions.
- **Better insight and intelligence** - the better use of data and artificial intelligence provides greater potential for transforming how demand is managed and how better decisions are made whilst protecting the integrity of customers' data.

Financial sustainability

Independent financial modelling demonstrates that this proposal is both prudent and ambitious. The transition requires an estimated investment of £70.1 million, with approximately half allocated to workforce transition and redundancy costs. However, the payback is swift and substantial.

After implementation costs are paid back in year three, we estimate that the modified proposal would deliver a total cumulative saving of over £400m over the 10-year period following the creation of new unitary councils. These savings come from consolidating corporate services, reducing duplication across lower-tier functions, optimising senior leadership, and ending the inefficiencies inherent in maintaining eleven separate council structures.

Critically, the proposal creates four financially sustainable councils with balanced tax bases. The funding analysis from Pixel LGR funding disaggregation model shows a fairer distribution of resources across Devon.

Each council will have the resources it needs to deliver quality services while building resilience for the future. No area is disadvantaged. No community is left behind.

The transition costs are targeted investment in Devon's future. They cover workforce transition support, new systems and technology, harmonising policies and procedures, community engagement, and building the capabilities needed for modern, efficient service delivery. Funding will come from a combination of useable reserves and flexible use of capital receipts across the participating councils.

Savings and improved viability

Across the Devon area (including Plymouth and Torbay), we estimate that our proposals will deliver annual, ongoing efficiency savings of around £50m-£70m per annum for both the base case and modified proposals. These figures are estimates based on detailed modelling and a range of assumptions. Tables below sets out a summary breakdown of the areas where savings will be achieved; full details of the methodology and assumptions used are set out in the appendix. After implementation costs are paid back, we estimate that the modified proposal would deliver a total cumulative saving of over £400m across a 10-year period following the creation of new Unitary councils.

These savings will improve the viability of local government in Devon, at a point where Devon is likely to see an overall reduction in the level of Government grant and business rates relative to other parts of the country due to the impact of the Fair Funding Review.

The total estimated annual saving of £58.4m has been included in our viability modelling. This is a net figure, with savings from the consolidation of lower tier and corporate services offsetting the additional costs of creating a fourth set of upper tier services. A brief explanation of each category of saving is set out here – further detail (including detail on assumptions and methodology used) is set out in the Annexe.

Service disaggregation costs are the additional fixed costs of setting up a fourth set of upper-tier services, an addition to existing costs for management, systems and specialist fixed cost functions in education, social care, highways, public health and other ‘top tier’ service areas across the two existing unitary councils and Devon County Council.

Service consolidation savings are savings to fixed costs for lower-tier services, delivered by reducing the level of duplication in systems, management costs and specialist functions for planning, waste collection, environmental health, parks, street cleaning and other functions that are currently carried out by 10 different councils (which would reduce to 4 under our proposals

Corporate service consolidation savings are savings to fixed costs for corporate services, delivered through a reduction in the number of corporate functions (HR, Finance, Asset Management, ICT etc.) across local government in Devon from 11 to 4.

Optimising senior leadership savings will be delivered through a reduction in the number of senior leaders across local government in Devon.

Optimising costs of democracy savings relate to a reduction in the number of elected councillors across Devon and a reduction in the number of local government elections held, because of reducing the number of councils from 11 to 4.

Property rationalisation is anticipated as a result of local government re-organisation – as in previous local government reorganisation (LGR) exercises elsewhere in the country, there will be buildings that become surplus to requirements because of the merger of councils, and a re-distribution of staff work bases. The saving has been estimated based on the costs of main office accommodation only.

Service transformation savings relate to further reductions in the cost of delivering frontline services (over and above the service consolidation savings) because of changes to delivery models that deliver efficiencies. There are likely to be many opportunities for service transformation savings; the estimated figures included here relate mainly to anticipated reductions in the cost of waste collection services and social care work because of a more localised approach to service delivery, cutting down on travel time and optimising processes. Savings in this category will be significantly larger in the modified proposal, which will create coherent and balanced service delivery geographies that allow for localised, efficient service delivery models.

Harmonisation of fees and charges will be required where councils merge – new authorities will have to set consistent policies and prices for charging for services like licensing, leisure and parking. The experience of previous LGR exercises elsewhere in the country is that harmonising charges results in a more efficient service, with higher levels of overall income.

The cost of implementing our proposals

Estimated Devon-wide implementation costs modified proposal:

Cost category	Estimated cost for Modified proposal - £m					Comments / explanation
	Year -1 (2026/27)	Year 0 (2027/28)	Year 1 (2028/29)	Year 2 (2029/30)	TOTAL	
Redundancy / workforce exit	0.0	5.0	14.0	6.0	25.0	Redundancy Costs
Programme delivery team	2.4	5.1	1.7	0.9	10.1	Four separate implementation teams + 1 Devon wide programme team.
External communication and branding	0.0	1.0	0.6	0.0	1.6	Re-branding exercise (signage, website) assumed for all councils; branding and communications post vesting day within BAU capacity
Workforce onboarding, culture and development	0.0	0.8	0.9	0.0	1.7	Induction and training for transferring staff; culture programmes for new councils
ICT set up and consolidation	2.4	8.7	5.0	1.0	17.1	Default approach will be data transfer into existing systems where possible.
New council establishment - policy & process	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.9	Continuing authority model for Torbay and Plymouth.
Shadow authority costs	0.7	1.9	0.0	0.0	2.6	Shadow / parallel running costs for Devon C & C and Exeter only
Property rationalisation	0.0	0.9	1.0	0.7	2.6	Mainly Devon and Exeter
Programme contingency	0.0	4.0	3.8	0.7	8.5	Contingency for unanticipated costs
TOTAL	5.8	27.7	27.3	9.3	70.1	

Financing implementation costs and payback periods

It is anticipated that implementation costs would be financed from a combination of Capital Receipts Flexibilities (together with a receipts pipeline) and reserves.

Our financial modelling has been used to estimate the profile of expenditure and savings over a 10-year period for the modified proposal across the whole of Devon. The financial profile up to and including Financial Year 2032/33 is set out in table below:

Financial profile

	Year -1 (2026/27) (£m)	Year 0 (2027/28) (£m)	Year 1 (2028/29) (£m)	Year 2 (2029/30) (£m)	Year 3 (2030/31) (£m)	Year 4 (2031/32) (£m)	Year 5 (2032/33) (£m)
Modified proposal	Year -1	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Transition costs	5.8	27.7	27.3	9.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Savings in each year	0.0	0.0	-4.9	-29.7	-54.8	-58.4	-58.4
Incremental net impact	5.8	27.7	22.4	-20.4	-54.8	-58.4	-58.4
Cumulative impact	5.8	33.5	55.9	35.6	-19.2	-77.6	-136.0

Modelling has demonstrated that the modified proposal is estimated to have strong payback periods (paying back all estimated implementation costs by the third year after vesting day). Over a 10-year period following the creation of new councils, modelling suggests that our proposal would deliver cumulative savings (after the payback of transition costs) of over £400m.

Options appraisals

Our modified proposal meets the Government's criteria more effectively than those being brought forward by other councils in Devon. Our proposal recognises the significant and impactful roles of Exeter, Devon's Capital City, Plymouth, Britain's Ocean City and the coastal towns of Torbay. These are drivers of economic growth and, together with the new Coast and Countryside unitary, create the opportunity to realise our vision and benefit the whole of Devon.

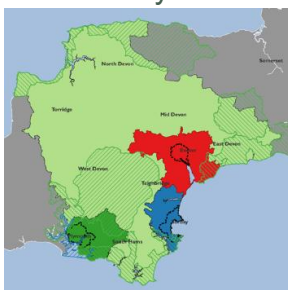
Why four unitaries?

We have carefully considered the options for Devon and concluded that four unitary authorities is the only model that works effectively

- **Not one** - A single Devon unitary of 1.2 million people across 2,560 km² would be too remote and unresponsive. Devon's geography demands recognition that different places have fundamentally different needs: Plymouth's established city-region scale, Exeter's rapid growth challenges, Torbay's coastal distinctiveness and the dispersed rural communities across Devon all need focused governance approaches that a single authority cannot provide.
- **Not two** - Keeping Plymouth as it is whilst creating a Devon authority for the rest of the County would submerge Exeter and Torbay within a vast authority where they become a minority voice. Recognising Plymouth as a unitary but not Exeter and Torbay is illogical.
- **Not three** - Various three-unitary configurations create different but equally serious problems. Keeping Plymouth whilst creating two large dispersed rural authorities (the '1-4-5' pattern) would still submerge Exeter and Torbay within a vast authority where they become a minority voice, repeating the democratic failure of the two-unitary option whilst adding unnecessary complexity. None of these configurations properly recognise the distinct roles and growth potential of all three urban centres whilst maintaining coherent service delivery geographies.

Four unitaries respects Devon's true geography. It allows Plymouth to serve its functional economic area effectively, gives Exeter the focused governance needed to manage rapid growth that benefits the wider county, maintains Torbay's proven unitary model, and creates a purpose-designed authority for coastal and countryside Devon that can focus on the distinct challenges of rural and coastal service delivery without being subsumed within urban priorities.

Our (modified) proposal
Four Unitary Councils



'New Devon'
Three Unitary Councils



'1-4-5'
Three Unitary Councils



The New Devon single unitary proposal simply amalgamates the existing eight districts and the county council into a super-sized Council that will co-exist alongside Plymouth and Torbay unitary councils. It bakes in constraints to growth over the next generation. At face value it may appear the simplest solution, but it is too large to be responsive. We know from research elsewhere that - especially in terms of relational public services - bigger is not always better. Economies of scale do not accrue indefinitely.

The '1-4-5' three-unitary proposal is only a marginal improvement on the above. This option fails to account for the need of Plymouth to grow and divides the remainder of Devon into two new councils submerging the urban centres of Exeter and coastal towns of Torbay - merging five and four councils respectively. In doing so it creates artificial unitary authorities based solely on old boundaries, lacking any coherent rationale. The result is an imbalanced structure that favours rural areas, undermines Exeter 's ability to fulfil its role as the region's capital city, and leaves Plymouth as the smallest and most constrained authority.

Our analysis shows that the four unitary solution is the one that most clearly meets the Government criteria and the needs of the people of Devon.

Government Criteria	Our Modified proposal	'New Devon'	'1-4-5'
	Four unitary councils	Three unitary councils	Three unitary councils
Single tier of local government			
Right size and financial resilience			
High quality and sustainable public services			
Collaboration and responsiveness			
Supports devolution			
Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment			

High Quality and Sustainable Public Services

Public service reform sits at the heart of our four unitary proposal. The current two-tier system creates inefficiencies through divided responsibilities between county and district councils, leading to confusion for residents, duplication of back-office functions, and barriers to integrated service delivery. By establishing four unitary authorities, we will remove these barriers and create the conditions for transformational change in how services are delivered, particularly in crucial areas such as children's social care, SEND provision, adult social care, and preventative services

The reorganisation creates genuine opportunities to strengthen multi-agency partnerships with the NHS, police, fire services and the voluntary sector. Working with Integrated Care Boards transitioning into Devon and Cornwall clusters, four unitary authorities provide the right scale for place-based delivery that responds to local need rather than organisational boundaries. This alignment of transformation across multiple public services creates a window that will not reopen. Designing these systems together now means they can work as an integrated whole from the start, whilst delay condemns Devon to years of attempting to retrofit neighbourhood teams onto governance that does not match functional communities.

Strengthening Democratic Representation and Empowering Communities

Our proposal sets out a governance model for four new unitary authorities in Devon, designed to strengthen democratic representation and empower communities through greater local engagement. The existing Leader and Cabinet system will continue for Exeter, Plymouth, and Torbay, with the same model applied to the new Coast and Countryside authority.

Indicative councillor numbers have been developed in line with Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) criteria to balance representation and workload. Proposed sizes are Exeter (72 councillors), Plymouth (60–72), Torbay (44–54), and Coast and Countryside (70–100). These figures reflect population, geography, and the need for effective governance. Final numbers will be confirmed through a full electoral review following consultation.

Neighbourhood-Based Governance and Civic Identity

All four proposed unitary authorities are committed to bringing decision-making closer to communities through strengthened neighbourhood governance.

Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay propose establishing Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) or similar structures that will act as inclusive forums for residents, councillors and partners to shape local priorities, influence service delivery and foster community cohesion. These bodies will be co-designed with communities and supported by dedicated neighbourhood teams, ensuring decisions reflect local needs and knowledge. Over time, these structures will gain devolved powers and budgets for local projects, planning input and community safety initiatives, funded through efficiency savings, harmonised budgets and developer contributions.

This approach builds on decades of asset-based community development across Devon's urban centres, embedding principles of local empowerment, accountability and collaboration. The model recognises that effective unitary authorities do not centralise all decision-making but instead create strong neighbourhood structures that bring governance closer to residents.

In creating its NACs, the Devon Coast and Countryside will build on the established network of Town and Parish Councils across rural Devon, which already provide vital local representation and democratic engagement. These councils will remain central to local governance, ensuring continuity and deep community connection across dispersed rural areas. The new unitary authority will work in partnership with Town and Parish Councils to strengthen local decision-making and ensure rural voices shape service delivery.

To preserve Exeter's historic identity during reorganisation, the proposal recommends establishing Charter Trustees under the Structural Change Order. These trustees will maintain ceremonial functions, including the Lord Mayor's role, civic regalia and historic rights, safeguarding Exeter's city status and heritage while governance transitions to the new unitary authority. This protects centuries of civic tradition whilst enabling modern governance reform.

This comprehensive approach to neighbourhood governance across all four authorities aligns with Government ambitions for devolution and creates a strong foundation for integrated, place-based services. Four unitary councils, each with robust local democratic structures, will ensure that decisions are made at the right level across the whole of Devon.

Supports Devolution

The proposed creation of four unitary councils will strengthen devolution by creating focused delivery partners capable of coherent planning for housing, transport and economic development across the whole of Devon.

The Leaders of Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council, Torbay Council and district councils across Devon have written jointly to Government Ministers to further develop enhanced powers and funding for the whole county of Devon through a comprehensive devolution agreement. This approach remains inclusive, with the door remaining open for Cornwall Council to join the authority in future, all Leaders are united in their ambition to move at pace to develop the Authority.

Devon's geography presents both a challenge and opportunity. Three substantial urban centres sit within a large rural and coastal area, each with distinct strengths and contributions to make. Plymouth brings established unitary experience, world-class marine and defence assets, and a growing knowledge economy. Exeter offers compact urban efficiency with strong academic and research links. Torbay combines coastal distinctiveness with proven innovation in health integration. Devon Coast and Countryside contributes extensive landscape assets, dispersed communities with deep local knowledge, and agricultural and tourism economies that define much of the county's identity.

The four-unitary structure enables each authority to serve its communities effectively whilst working collaboratively at the strategic tier. Expanding the boundaries of Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay to reflect functional economic areas allows better coordination of transport infrastructure and accelerated delivery of housing and employment across their travel-to-work areas. This creates a balanced structure where Devon Coast and Countryside can focus resources on the distinct requirements of delivering quality services across dispersed rural and coastal communities, whilst the three urban authorities address the concentrated demands of city-region growth.

This structure will pave the way for a South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority, replacing Devon and Torbay County Combined Authority and granting enhanced powers for spatial planning, infrastructure coordination, housing delivery, skills development, and climate resilience.

A future MSA would:

- Integrate transport networks across urban and rural Devon and deliver a single Local Transport Plan that connects communities to opportunities.
- Coordinate housing and regeneration through strategic planning and funding that serves diverse housing needs from city centre regeneration to rural affordable housing.
- Drive skills development for key sectors climate science, marine autonomy, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, agriculture and tourism
- Support health integration and innovation zones.
- Advocate nationally for infrastructure investment and climate action that benefits the whole county.

This differentiated approach, unified by collaborative working at the strategic level, represents genuine public service reform that places the needs of residents and communities at its centre providing a strong basis for the early preparation of the Spatial Development Strategy to achieve the Government's national growth ambitions whilst respecting the distinct character and requirements of urban, coastal and rural Devon.

Transition and Implementation

The Transition Plan for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Devon will follow a structured, phased approach to ensure stability and continuity. Initially, an informal Implementation Team will be established in each authority to oversee preliminary planning work and to recommend terms of reference to the statutory Joint Committees when they are established. This will ensure critical preparatory work continues during the Government's consultation and decision-making phase.

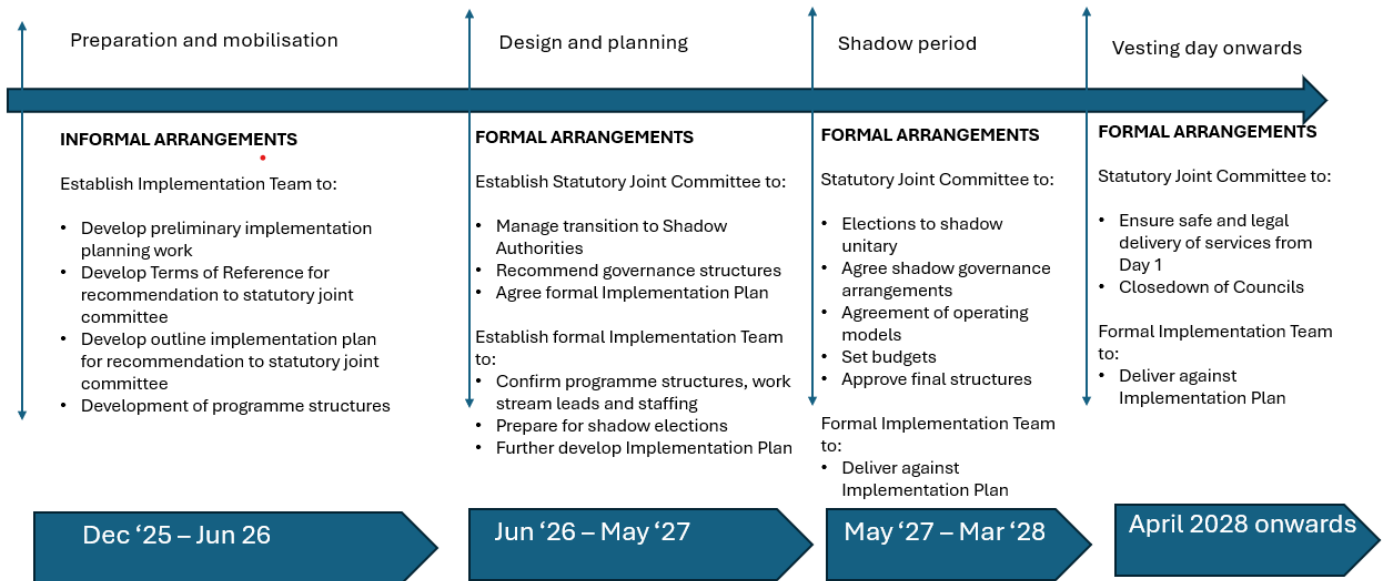
Robust governance arrangements will be established to ensure political oversight, strategic leadership, and operational delivery are aligned and effective.

During the period up to the Structural Change Order (SCO), a Devon Leaders Oversight Board will provide collective political direction and assurance, while an LGR Programme Board comprising current Devon Chief Executives will oversee strategic alignment, risk and interdependencies.

After the SCO is made, Joint Committees and formal Implementation Teams will manage the implementation plan. Critical services such as Adult Social Care and Children's Services including Special Educational Needs and Disabled (SEND) will be prioritised to ensure a "safe and legal" transition.

The approach prioritises safety, stability, and phased transformation to deliver improved outcomes.

Proposed Timeline



Governance



Conclusion

This joint proposal is informed by detailed financial modelling, tested against Government criteria, and shaped by engagement with communities.

It meets every test Government has set for unitary local government. It creates financially sustainable councils. It improves service quality. It strengthens local democracy. It enables devolution and regional growth.

Most importantly, it serves the people of Devon. From Barnstaple to Brixham, from Ivybridge to the most remote coastal villages, this model ensures that every community benefits from transformation.

Plymouth gains the scale needed to lead beyond its city boundaries, unlocking growth and opportunity. Exeter becomes a stronger urban centre, finally able to coordinate development across its natural economic area. Torbay continues its tradition of innovation with enhanced stability and resources. Devon's rural and coastal communities receive dedicated focus and tailored services.

This is not simply administrative reorganisation but the foundation for genuine public service reform. By creating single-tier authorities, we remove the structural barriers that currently fragment support, confuse residents, and waste resources on managing organisational boundaries. We create the conditions for a cultural transformation in how services are delivered: integrated around people, focused on prevention, built on genuine partnership with communities rather than organisational convenience.

We will unlock the potential of our two cities and the three towns in Torbay to turbocharge economic growth and prosperity for the nation and drive the dynamism of our coast and countryside communities.

The proposal recommends reorganising Devon's local government into four unitary councils aligned to economic geographies. This model simplifies governance, removes duplication, and delivers:

- **Financial resilience** through balanced tax bases and sustainable council sizes.
- **Integrated, high-quality services** designed around people and place.
- **Clear accountability** and stronger collaboration.
- **Support for devolution** with a balanced voice for Devon.
- **Enhanced community engagement** via participatory governance while preserving local identity.

This is a strategic investment in Devon's future prosperity, resilience, and democratic strength.

This is Devon's moment. A once-in-a-generation opportunity to build local government that works for everyone. Four councils. One connected Devon. A stronger future for all.

Full detailed analysis and supporting evidence from Exeter City Council can be found in Annexe 1, with Plymouth City Council's analysis provided in Annexe 2.

