

JIM MCMAHON OBE MP
Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Cc Will Garton, Director General

Dear Minister

Thank you for your letter to Council Leaders of 16th December 2024, referencing the publication of the government's English Devolution White Paper. We share the new government's ambition to devolve powers from Whitehall to local government

As a group of Leaders, we all work collaboratively and collectively to deliver services for our communities of which we can be proud. Nevertheless, we recognise the strategic ambition as set out in the White Paper, and we wished to convey how we intend to deliver these aims in Devon.

We do not consider this is a good time to embark on a national programme to reorganise the structures of local government, precisely because it will deflect from the delivery of public services at a time when these are of critical importance to our communities. We also question the assertion this will deliver significant efficiency savings or create councils that are necessarily more sustainable and financially viable for the future. That has certainly not been the case in Somerset or Cornwall.

That said, we recognise it is the government's stated intent, as set out in the White Paper, to do so within two tier areas. In which case we consider it is essential meaningful consideration is given to realigning local government structures in order to provide the simplicity outlined in the White Paper.

Discussions are already taking place between the political leaders in Devon, with a view to exploring the potential local authority boundaries that respond to the key criteria of place, identity, health locality and functional economic geography. However, while we have agreement on the principles of this, we have clearly not yet had the time to do the work necessary to outline how this would best work in practice. We are committed to working together, including with colleagues, to submit our initial plans by March as requested.

We know Plymouth are looking to invoke your 'exception' policy in respect of the 500,000 lower limit. Our own Exeter itself has ambitions to do similar. There is no consensus at this stage. **As such there is no clear plan, one of your criteria for postponing elections.**

To comply fully with the legislative and consultative aspects of the local government reorganisation process, **we believe it is essential that local elections take place in Devon County Council as planned in May 2025. This will provide a renewed political mandate.** A decision to cancel the elections would be a denial of democracy. Any proposed changes to the arrangements of local government will not have been decided by then, nor will they have had the chance to be consulted on. Even a legacy county council that only has a few years to exist deserves a valid democratic mandate to oversee its winding down and effective transfer of functions to new authorities.

The delay in the formation of a Mayoral Combined Authority is a result of the failure of upper tier authorities in Devon to agree. The idea it is being obstructed by Local Government Reorganisation is fanciful. Our CCA (for Devon County and Torbay) is due to be created in February, and we do not believe that there can be any justification for delaying the proposed county elections to deliver devolution. Indeed, it has been made clear to us by your officials that Devon was not expected to be entered into the Priority Programme precisely because our Foundation Strategic Authority would

provide us with a devolved entity on which to build or expand as necessary, and did not require reorganisation to 'unlock' this, as per the terms of your letter.

In summary, we wish to work collaboratively and constructively with partners over the coming months. We will develop considered and coherent proposals around changes to the current model of 11 councils in Devon to a smaller number of suitably-sized unitaries aligned with government expectations. **We strongly believe that democracy is at its most vital when change is being proposed, and would wish for the county elections to go ahead in order for the county council to retain a democratic mandate.** And finally, we remain wedded to serving our communities and engaging with them effectively as we seek to build the strong, sustainable, ambitious and resilient councils of the future for Devon.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Paul Arnott, Leader of East Devon

Cllr Julian Brazil, Leader of South Hams

Cllr David Clayton, Leader of North Devon

Cllr Mandy Ewings, Leader of West Devon

Cllr Ken James, Leader of Torridge

Cllr Richard Keeling, Leader of Teignbridge

Cllr Luke Taylor, Leader of Mid Devon