

**TAVISTOCK TOWN COUNCIL
BUDGET AND POLICY COMMITTEE
TUESDAY 27th FEBRUARY, 2024**

**BRIEFING NOTE
DEVON AND TORBAY COMBINED AUTHORITY
(CONSULTATION)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Committee will be aware of the background to devolution in England from its origins in the 2012 report 'No Stone Unturned; in Pursuit of Growth' through to the first 'Devolution Deals' for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in November 2014.
- 1.2 Devolution is to be distinguished from Local Government reorganisation insofar as:-
 - a) Local Government reorganisation (typically moving from District and County to Unitary authorities), is principally associated with combining existing principal authorities into a single entity to secure improved economy, efficiency and effectiveness and representation of place;
 - b) Devolution however, more typically involves the continuation of existing two tier principal authorities which, in addition to continuing in their prior form, come together as an additional and new statutory body - a 'Combined Authority' designed for the purpose of accessing increased powers and or finance from Government in specific areas of activity. However, it should be noted that the highest level Devolution deal (Level 3) does represent, de-facto a form of local Government reorganisation insofar as it creates a single institution with a directly elected Mayor (such as seen in the case of existing Metro/Mayors).
- 1.3 The other levels of Devolution are Level 1- informal joint working between authorities and Level 2 – a single institution without an elected Mayor (as evidenced in this consultation). The most local example of an operating Level 2 Devolution deal can be seen in Cornwall.
- 1.4 Although not on the table on Devon, by contrast level 3 deals provide the highest level of devolution/autonomy including the power to set a precept on Council Tax and a supplement on Business Rates. The Government's preference (and this is understood to be that of His

Majesty's Opposition also) is toward the establishment of Mayoral combined Authorities (MCA) (level 3).

- 1.5 However, these have proved politically problematic in the shires. So far as Devon is concerned the Committee will also recall the substantial historic disruption caused in the County when there was previously a move for a local Government unitary reorganisation (and associated legal proceedings) previously, together with the recent failure, in neighbouring Cornwall, of an initiative to seek to introduce a MCA after public opposition. Accordingly Devon is now the only administrative area in the South West which has not chosen to adopt unitary operating arrangements. The focus of this report is therefore upon 'devolution', and not the more fundamental matter of local government 'reorganisation'.
- 1.6 The aims and purposes that underline the Government's devolution policy have been described as (<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07029/SN07029.pdf>);-
- Economic growth: including the promotion of local growth, the achievement of various versions of spatial and sectoral balance, and fair distributional outcomes for all;
 - Better and more integrated public services: more efficient, and better matched to local preferences including offering holistic solutions and equity of outcomes;
 - Enhanced public engagement and accountability: the promotion of engagement and participation as part of a healthy democracy, and being closer to the decision makers'.
- 1.7 Aspects which (according to the level of deal sought) can be covered include investment funds, adult education budget, business support, fiscal powers, transport, planning and land use and housing. Each deal is a matter of negotiation as between the bidding authorities and (it is understood) each of the Government departments from which devolution is sought (ie negotiations are not on a unified basis).
- 1.8 More generally Parliamentary publications such as the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's 'The Evolution of Devolution' and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's 'Progress on Devolution in England' indicate mixed views regarding the effectiveness, centralised nature and costs associated with development of devolution deals.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

- 2.1 Following extensive consultation discussion with Government departments Devon County Council and Torbay Unitary Council, together with the districts (but not Plymouth City Council which withdrew) have negotiated a draft proposal which is subject to consultation between 12th February and 24th March 2024. The proposal can be viewed at <https://www.devontorbaydeal.org.uk/> and a copy of the questionnaire is appended, should the Committee wish to make recommendations for consideration by Council by way of response.
- 2.2 More broadly it is difficult, at the current time, to make a meaningful assessment of any potential impact of the proposed devolution arrangements on Town and Parish Councils in general or, Tavistock Town Council in particular. In cases of Local Government reorganisation (unitary) arrangements tend to drive major structural change for Towns and Parishes – typically driven on the one hand by economy/efficiency/effectiveness, and on the other, increased emphasis on local place/locality. By comparison devolution deals add an additional combined higher level administrative structure to the Local Government family (albeit not technically another tier of Local Government) to do things at county level that historically may have sat elsewhere (eg with Government agencies).
- 2.3 Moreover the subject areas which fall within the proposed devolution deal do not lend themselves readily to town/parish involvement, also the level of additional funding is small relative to the combined budgets of participating authorities. That said an argument frequently made in favour of devolution is that it can lead to enhanced future opportunities.
- 2.4 In the case of Devon it will also be noted that the voting arrangements are weighted toward the County and participating unitary authority (notwithstanding the latter being of a size comparable to the larger districts such as Teignbridge and Exeter) - meaning that the districts represent a junior partner in the proposal.

3 RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 The Committee consider whether, and if so how, to respond to the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority consultation on the draft proposal.

**CARL HEARN
TOWN CLERK
TAVISTOCK TOWN COUNCIL
FEBRUARY 2024**