

**TAVISTOCK TOWN COUNCIL
BUDGET & POLICY COMMITTEE
21st JANUARY 2025**

**BRIEFING NOTE
ENGLISH DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER**

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Committee will be aware that on 16th December 2024 the English Devolution White Paper (the 'White Paper') was published. It can be accessed at:-
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>
- 1.2 For a summary one can also go to:-
<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/english-devolution-white-paper> or for a selection of sector responses
<https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/59481-english-devolution-white-paper-reaction-from-the-sector>
- 1.3 Given the scope of the document this Briefing Note is not intended to be a comprehensive commentary of content. This also reflects that the White Paper is necessarily a statement of intent, as such it does not include a draft version of a Bill, similarly many aspects are qualified either by sequential factors, or are subject to the outcome of future consultation.
- 1.4 It is perhaps sufficient to say that, if delivered in full (a highly ambitious goal), it could have a transformational effect upon local Government. Potentially comparable to the combined impact of the local government reorganisation of the 1970's, introduction of new unitaries in the 1990's, governance changes of 2000 and Localism Act more recently.
- 1.5 Not least because it changes the local government landscape fundamentally through a commitment to elected Mayors with additional powers (some accruing from Government, others from constituent Councils), to larger units of local government

(typically iro 500,000 population), strategic authorities, unitisation, changed funding/responsibilities and substantially reduced numbers of principal authority Councillors amongst much else.

2. COMMENTARY

2.1 As noted above this is a very early stage, and much of the content is directed at the strategic level. There are though some areas which may, over time, either directly or indirectly impact upon the Town/Parish sector more than others to which the Committee/Council may wish to have regard.

2.2 At this point in time some of the more likely could include:

a) Reorganisation:- The consequential impacts of a commitment to unitary authorities. Devon is (unusually for the Westcountry) an area with both County and District Councils (outside of Plymouth and Torbay) – ie the 1972 local authority settlement. Historically it has also been very reluctant to consider meaningful change and, it has been argued, the Devon/Torbay deal is likely the minimum acceptable to government (til now).

Early indications are that a tentative consensus may be emerging in Devon Authorities that whilst a single unitary authority would not be viable two might be workable. However, on the matter of creating a wider/regional strategic authority with a Mayor the current positions of Devon, Cornwall and Plymouth do not indicate a consensus at this stage.

Moreover, whilst the White Paper is clearly committed to unitary local government it falls short of saying it will mandate it (instead saying 'we will facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for two tier areas').

That makes for an uncertain situation. The dramatic impact on Town/Parish Councils (size, finances, services offered, assets managed etc) of unitary local government is well documented and evident in all the counties surrounding Devon. But what a continuation of the current two tier arrangements in an environment where Government encourages, but does not

require, unitisation might mean for Town/Parish Councils is more uncertain and more likely to vary from District to District. As things stand the higher level powers and opportunities in the White Paper will not be available in two tier areas with the highest being reserved to combined areas with a Mayor.

- b) Neighbourhood Involvement:- There is the suggestion that 'we will expect new councils to take a proactive and innovative approach to neighbourhood involvement and community governance so that citizens are empowered'.

Again this could represent either an opportunity for Town/Parish Councils to enhance their local leadership roles, or a threat if new/conflicting local governance structures arise.

- c) Standards:- The indication that consultation will take place in the arena of standards/conduct in areas such as the following is welcome:

- i. A mandatory code of conduct;
- ii. Requirement to convene standards committees;
- iii. A national body to address serious cases;
- iv. Powers to suspend;
- v. Disqualification;
- vi. Interim suspension;
- vii. Publication of breach outcomes;

and consistent with the work undertaken in this area nationally over recent years. However, it should be noted that the commitment is to consult. As such any failure to deliver all (but most especially in areas (iii-vi)) the above would perpetuate the current oft-criticised and inadequate arrangements for the sector in this arena.

- d) Workforce Development:- it is unclear if/how this might extend to the Town/Parish sector.
- e) Remote Attendance:- if introduced may fundamentally change the nature of political and organisational relationships (depending on scope/adoption) and perhaps the cost base for

many smaller local Councils. It is unclear what the provisions mooted for proxy voting might mean or are intended to achieve in this part of the sector. If poorly introduced it could however lead to de facto 'executive arrangements' by other means.

f) Publication Requirements: this would change the information available to the public regarding Councillor contact details.

2.3 Of course for existing principal authorities the issues are likely much greater as they may cease to exist, where they do exist there is absorption into large strategic authorities alongside the challenge of surrendering aspects of power and influence to both those and elected Mayors. Different arrangements and responsibilities will apply to Foundation Strategic Authorities, Mayoral Strategic Authorities, Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (the governments chosen destination for all areas) and (least favoured) Combined County Authorities.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 As previously indicated this is a very early stage in what will be a multi-year journey which may or may not change along the way. Accompanying that will be sector and community specific risks and opportunities – anticipated or not.

3.2 This report is therefore for information and review at this stage and is necessarily selective. Further reports will be brought forward as circumstances develop including on the local position in Devon.

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