

## **Local Government Reorganisation Options Appraisal – Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Board**

### **Background**

1. The Local Government Reorganisation Task and Finish Group held a workshop on 5 August 2025 to consider options for Local Government Reorganisation. The following Councillors took part:  
  
Local Government Reorganisation Task and Finish Group Members:  
Councillors Brook (for Spacagna), Cowell, Foster, Harvey (for Douglas-Dunbar), Law and Tolchard.  
  
Other Councillors: Councillors Bye, Fox, David Thomas, Jackie Thomas and Tyerman.
2. The Task-and-Finish Group were reminded that the Government had invited all the local authorities in Devon to submit proposals for unitary local government across all of Devon. The Government was clear that an options appraisal could help to demonstrate why the Council's proposal approach best met the assessment criteria set out by Government.
3. The purpose of the Task-and-Finish Group was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the options under consideration. These strengths and weaknesses would be used to inform the wider Options Appraisal which was underway and would ultimately be included within the draft proposal to be considered by the Council in November 2025.
4. The options under consideration were:
  - Torbay remaining as it is – or expanding into South Hams and Teignbridge
  - A new unitary council covering Torbay, South Hams, Teignbridge and West Devon
  - Torbay becoming part of a larger Devon unitary authority
5. The strengths and weaknesses of each of the above options is set out at Appendix 1 to this report. This feedback reflects members views and will be tested against data as the Options Appraisal develops.

### **Recommendation**

6. That the report of the Local Government Reorganisation Task and Finish Group summarising the discussions on strengths and weaknesses of the

options under consideration be forwarded to the Council's Project Team to help to inform the Council's Options Appraisal.

## **Background Papers**

[Agenda for Local Government Reorganisation Task and Finish Group on Tuesday, 5 August 2025, 5.00 pm](#)

## Findings from the Local Government Reorganisation Task-and-Finish Group

### Option 1 – Torbay First

**Torbay remaining as it is, or expanding into South Hams and Teignbridge – with a reconfiguration of the rest of Devon.**

The Task-and-Finish Group were asked to consider:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Torbay Council remaining as it is?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages of expanding into South Hams and Teignbridge (along the Local Care Partnership boundary)?
- What are the options for reorganising the rest of Devon? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those options?

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would support the continuation of the unique arrangements Torbay Council has with the Integrated Care Organisation (ICO)</li> <li>• Torbay Council is financially stable and has been able to invest in place services in recent years</li> <li>• Torbay Council has mostly good service delivery especially Children’s Services, Adult Social Care and place-based services</li> <li>• Torbay Council has lower Council Tax than the rest of Devon</li> <li>• Residents have local connectivity to Torbay, with services relatable to place – Torbay has a clear identity to its residents, businesses and visitors</li> <li>• The number of councillors that make up Torbay Council means that there is good local representation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration needs to be given to whether Torbay Council, on its current footprint, remains viable in the long term</li> <li>• Torbay has limited land to enable development for economic growth</li> <li>• Torbay has limited land to meet housing need</li> <li>• Consideration needs to be given to whether a fourth rural unitary would be a resilient unitary authority</li> </ul>

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a strong third (voluntary and community) sector in Torbay</li> <li>• Decision-making is at a local area</li> <li>• The business community feel part of Torbay, not something wider</li> <li>• Torbay has a strong visitor economy which increases the area's population towards the Government's suggested population of unitary authorities of 500,000. And whilst this puts pressure on services, the Council copes well with this extra demand</li> <li>• Torbay Council is a nimble authority</li> <li>• This option allows for self-determination of Plymouth and Exeter</li> <li>• The creation of Torbay Council in 1998 reflected the will of people at that time</li> <li>• Our events are Torbay focused and maintaining Torbay Council would protect our cultural assets</li> </ul>	

Members identified that some of the weaknesses of this option could be addressed through expanding to cover some of the area of the Local Care Partnership.

If the proposals for an expanded Plymouth and a unitary council for Exeter (with extended boundaries) were accepted by the Government, a third unitary authority made up of the rest of Devon, including Torbay, would have significant weaknesses for Torbay communities. The Devon unitary would be much larger geographically than the other authorities and there would be little connectivity between the north and the south of the area. However, there could be economic benefits.

## Option 2 – The 1:4:5 Model

**A new unitary Council covering Torbay, South Hams, Teignbridge and West Devon.**

**A new unitary Council covering Exeter, Mid Devon, East Devon, North Devon and Torridge**

**Plymouth City Council remaining as is, or expanding its boundaries**

The Task-and-Finish Group were asked to consider:

- What would be strengths and weaknesses of a new authorities covering:
  - Torbay, South Hams, West Devon and Teignbridge?
  - Exeter, Mid Devon, East Devon, North Devon and Torridge?
- What would be the impact if Plymouth's boundaries expanded?

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This option provides more land for growth and housing</li><li>• The grouping of the Five look to Exeter as a centre, especially as a centre for commerce</li><li>• Potential for the tourism economy of the Four to be strengthened around a natural environment offer</li><li>• The population numbers of the three proposed unitary authorities are much closer to the Government figure of 500,000</li><li>• The existing district councils prefer this option rather than a single Devon council</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The demography of the Four has an older population base</li><li>• There would be a negative impact on Integrated Care Organisation</li><li>• Torbay's VCSE/Helpline Model based on community support would be threatened which goes against the principles in the English Devolution White paper</li><li>• Concern that currently the Four does not have a shared identity, there is no identifiable primary centre of commerce or economic activity</li><li>• Services over a larger geography would have to be carefully and sensitively created, otherwise they would not be relatable to place</li><li>• An expanded Plymouth would have a negative impact on the growth potential of the Four</li><li>• There would be challenges of disaggregating children's services and adult social care – and in the Four the added</li></ul>

Strengths	Weaknesses
	<p>challenge of aggregating Torbay's children's services and adult social care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There would be financial pressure and service design issues by delivering children's services and adult social care over a more rural geography than the tight urban delivery model currently delivered in Torbay</li> <li>• Consideration would need to be given to how children's services is run in the Four given the potential for Devon's children's services to be delivered by a Children's Trust and whether this would result in a twin track approach for delivery. There would be an impact on children and young people as well as on budgets.</li> <li>• The impact of combining authorities with and without Housing Revenue Accounts would need to be considered</li> <li>• distraction from BAU (business as usual) especially SEND (special educational needs and disabilities)</li> <li>• There would be more remote democracy for Torbay residents with a risk of fractured or lack of representation</li> <li>• There would still be a need for localised service delivery teams and increased travel time for officers</li> <li>• Examples around the country (including Birmingham City Council) which show that bigger unitaries don't represent good value for money</li> </ul>

### Option 3 – Devon Unitary

#### A single unitary Council either including or excluding Plymouth

The Task-and-Finish Group were asked to consider:

- What would be the strengths and weaknesses of a single Devon council:
  - If it included Plymouth?
  - If Plymouth was excluded, but kept its existing boundaries?
  - If Plymouth was excluded, but expanded its boundaries?

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There would be increased land supply for future growth areas</li><li>• There could be economies of scale</li><li>• Residents across Devon would only have one Council to deal with</li><li>• The authority could speak in a single voice and could enable stronger partnership working, with a single strategic stakeholder board</li><li>• There is the potential for more dispassionate decision making and the ability to take more strategic decisions</li><li>• A single Devon identity would be easier to market</li><li>• A single authority would remove competition for foster carers, for example, between current councils</li><li>• The new authority would bring together best practice from current councils</li><li>• Potential to build stronger links between the universities and the colleges</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There are questions over where the administrative centre for the authority would be, but regardless there would be excessive travelling for members and officers across such a large geography</li><li>• A single Devon authority would mix rural, coastal and urban areas with the potential for friction between the different areas</li><li>• There are significant inequalities spread across Devon</li><li>• There will be inequalities as a result of some places not having parish councils</li><li>• Services would not relate to place, with a reduced focus on Torbay</li><li>• Torbay residents would pay more Council Tax</li><li>• The integrated care organisation would be at risk</li><li>• There are risks due to the scale of the area, with the geography being too big and a lack of connectivity across the area</li><li>• There would be less representation</li><li>• Difficult to ensure community wealth building</li></ul>

Strengths	Weaknesses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There would be fewer councillors meaning an increased workload for councillors and an increased risk of councillor burnout</li> <li>• Decision making could feel remote from communities</li> <li>• A one size fits all approach to Council Tax Support Scheme, parking, costs etc could have disadvantages</li> <li>• The new authority would need to deal with the significant financial liabilities from Devon County Council, including the backlog of repairs for highways</li> <li>• Risk of a reduction in the quality of services provided in Torbay, including Children's Services, as a result of aggregation</li> <li>• The transition costs would be significant</li> <li>• The pace of getting things done could be slower</li> <li>• There would be a loss of identity of the English Riviera and a threat to Torbay's cultural assets</li> <li>• There is the potential for the relocation of emerging sectors from Torbay e.g. photonics and electronics</li> <li>• Bigger doesn't always equal better for local authorities (e.g. Birmingham; Somerset; Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole)</li> <li>• There is the potential for dispassionate decision-making, with less accountability to residents, and more parochial decision making</li> </ul>