# County Councillor's Report 10th February - Kingskerswell

Devon County Council met in early January in response to the Government's decision to implement a 'top down' devolution plan for Devon and Torbay which included proposals for a Greater South West Mayoral Region. This would sweep away local government as we know it – County Councils and District Councils - and replace it with a Unitary Council for an area that has, as yet, not been identified.

The recommendations to the Council were to support the Leader of the Council in submitting a letter of intent to Government committing to the Government's programme. This would enable the Council to develop plans for local government reorganisation and deliver a Mayoral Strategic Authority. As a consequence, the County Council would request Government to postpone the County Council elections due to take place in May 2025.

This is a hugely important issue – the system is clearly broken. The County Council is virtually bankrupt and people do not understand the different responsibilities of County, District, City, Borough, Parish and Town Councils. The government have said that they wish to see Unitary Councils, which do everything, covering areas of at least half a million people. There would be a larger Regional Council for the South West headed by a Mayor for strategic planning.

The Conservative administration at Devon wished to rush through the proposals – they did not consult with anyone, let alone the District Councils - so that they would get an extra year in power before an election for a massive Unitary Authority covering the whole of Devon and Torbay but not Plymouth.

Simply put, I think this is Democracy Denied and ill thought out. Clearly local government needs reform, and it is obvious that a single Council that does everything makes a lot of sense. Rushing this through without first consulting voters is fundamentally wrong and I did not support this when it was voted upon in Council.

The Government has, however, turned down our County Council's request to postpone its elections in May.

Last Wednesday afternoon Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government Angela Rayner announced that the council's request was among those which have been rejected, meaning that the council's May elections will proceed as planned.

The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (CCA) – the governance needed for devolved decision-making powers and funding to flow from Whitehall to local decision-makers in Devon and Torbay – is now official.

It means that decisions, previously made in Whitehall, will now be made locally on priority issues, including housing, jobs and skills, transport and the economy.

Members in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords have debated the regulations required to establish the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. Last Wednesday, the Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Jim McMahon, signed the legislation on behalf of the Secretary of State, under power delegated by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, legally bringing the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (CCA) into being from today, Wednesday 5 February 2025.

The members of the Devon and Torbay CCA will meet formally at the inaugural meeting on Wednesday 19th March 2025 at the offices of West Devon Borough Council in Tavistock.

The CCA members are drawn from Devon County Council, Torbay Council, Devon's District/City/Borough Councils. The Police and Crime Commissioner is also a member alongside a representative from the business community and skills providers.

The Devon and Torbay CCA will be responsible for making decisions about the powers and funding devolved to it from Whitehall through the devolution deal that was agreed in January 2024.

Figures presented to Cabinet in the target Budget show a proposed 8.2% increase in the revenue budget for adult services with a 5.5% rise in children's services and 3.4% for climate change, environment and transport. Full Council set to debate the budget in February.

Reductions in other departmental spending means an overall rise of 5.9% in the budget for next year with a total spend of over £784.1 million.

In a new report, Director of Finance, Angie Sinclair, says there has been a renewed drive across the council to cut costs. But she adds: "Inflationary pressures continue to be felt across the economy, local government and our partners, despite the rate of inflation reducing in the past two years from its peak.

"Social care is particularly impacted by increases to the national living wage which is again increased by above inflation and the increases to National Insurance announced in the Chancellor's Budget."

"This is reflected in the proposed target budgets with total investment of £31.9 million to cover inflation and national living wage plus £33.8 million to cover demand and other spending pressures and priorities. To enable the authority to set a balanced budget, savings, alternative funding and additional income of £21.7 million have been identified.

She says there are no plans to raid the council's balances to boost spending.

"This reflects a strategy of 'living within our means' and as such to set service budgets that are affordable within anticipated income and funding totals for next year."

Angie Sinclair will tell the Cabinet that the target budget includes the loss of £10.1 million in Government support to rural areas. The money is being re-directed to areas of deprivation and Devon will not receive any cash at all. It means Devon has the lowest settlement increase of any of the 21 county councils. Devon's revenue support grant was £135 million in 2019 and will be £0.75 million this coming year. Torbay will receive an additional £10 million and Plymouth £13 million

Alistair Dewhirst - alistair.dewhirst@devon.gov.uk / Tel 07836 704127