County Councillor's Report 17th March - Kingskerswell

There will be a 4.99% increase in council tax in Devon for the coming financial year. The County Council agreed an increase of 2.99% for general services with an extra 2% for adult social care.

The annual council tax for an average Band D home will rise by £85.59 – or £1.64 a week – to £1,801.26.

There will be increases in spending of 8.2% on adult services and 5.5% for children's services.

Reductions in other departmental spending and increased income will mean an overall rise of 5.9% in the budget with a total spend of over £784.1 million.

Councillors also agreed an extra £4 million to boost highways and repair potholes since the target budget was set last month.

There will be an additional £5 million for children's social care to provide a range of services to allow vulnerable children to be cared for closer to their families and communities. And there'll be an extra £500,000 to support the work of district councils and homeless organisations which brings Devon County Council's homelessness budget up to £1 million. The extra cash has come from the new additional council tax being levied on second homes.

The budget was approved by 38 votes with four against and seven abstentions.

Council leader James McInnes sharply criticised the Government's decision to end the Rural Services Delivery Grant which helps councils with the extra cost of providing services in rural areas. This had cost Devon over £10 million, he said, with funding switched to more urban areas.

In addition, Devon had received the lowest financial settlement of all 21 county councils.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) – What happens next?

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has asked the County Council to work with other councils in the area to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation.

The Council is currently engaging politicians, businesses, emergency services, health services, educators and other representatives of local communities to share information related to finance and demand for council services in the county of Devon and work with them to co-design proposals for LGR. The council wants a proposal which puts residents' needs first and will provide efficient and effective services which are locally accountable.

The time scale is that the Devon & Torbay Combined Authority (CCA) came into being on Wednesday 5th March; LGR interim plan submission deadline is Friday 21st March; Devon County Council Elections are on Thursday 1st May; LGR full plan submission deadline will be Friday 28th November 2025; Elections to shadow authorities will be in April or May 2027 and Vesting day for new authorities will be in April 2028.

The leaders of Devon, Plymouth and Torbay Councils have agreed to work together to explore the creation of a Mayor-led strategic authority but there appears to be no time scale for this.

The County Council will not suggest a model for the new authority this side of the elections in May, However, there are suggestions in the offing from other councils which I suspect will go to government on the 21st.

Plymouth are keen to see a “Greater Plymouth”. The government has said they are looking for at least half a million residents but will accept a smaller size in exceptional circumstances. Exeter has suggested that it would also apply for a special circumstances solution but what that would look like is not known at the moment.

A number of the District Councils are suggesting the 1:4:5 solution. A Greater Plymouth of about 350,000 population which would include the western parts of South Hams and West Devon. The 4 is the remainder of South Hams, West Devon, Teignbridge and Torbay would be just under the half million population. Finally, East Devon, Mid Devon, North Devon, Torridge and Exeter would be just over half a million population.

Issues surrounding all the proposals are debt and current reserves – Devon and Plymouth both carry high levels of debt – Devon’s will depend on what the government does with the SEND debt problem and Plymouth will have around £1.2 billion of development debt by 2028. The District Councils all have adequate reserves which could be spent before the formation of the Unitary Authority.

Governance is also a problem. Devon County’s 60 councillors each have a constituency of about 12,000 but do not deal with waste or planning; the 36 Torbay councillors have a constituency of 3,000 who deal with all aspects of local government. To take constituencies down to the Torbay level would mean 276 councillors!

Finally, there will need to be a system of local committees like HATOC to deal with highways, planning and waste – my suspicion is that we might end up with a system that looks pretty much as we have at the moment but a cost of around £80 million to set up!

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