



April 2024

The South Hams Society Interest

For the last 60 years, the South Hams Society has been stimulating public interest and care for the beauty, history and character of the South Hams. We encourage high standards of planning and architecture that respect the character of the area. We aim to secure the protection and improvement of the landscape, features of historic interest and public amenity and to promote the conservation of the South Hams as a living, working environment. We take the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty very seriously and work hard to increase people's knowledge and appreciation of our precious environment. We support the right development - in the right places - and oppose inappropriate development.

Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority consultation feedback report analysis

An analysis of the response to the joint consultation on the draft proposal for the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (DT CCA) has now been published. And the findings make it clear that support for the scheme is far from universal.

In all 890 responses to the consultation were received, of which 99 were letters/emails from organisations and individuals, and 791 were completed online questionnaires.

The consultation, which took place between 12 February and 24 March 2024, posed questions regarding each of the seven elements of the draft proposal for the CCA, with respondents being asked to select from one of six tick-boxes when responding to each. Those were 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neither agree nor disagree' and 'Don't know'.

In only one instance, namely whether the new Authority would help improve the efficiency and co-ordination of the region's public transport, did an overall majority of respondents (52%) either agree or strongly agree.

But as well as simply ticking boxes, respondents were also offered the option of being able to add their own comments either in support of, or in opposition to, each of those seven proposals. And improving transport was one of only two instances where there were more positive and supportive comments (252) than those reacting negatively (240).

As for the other six questions, 43% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that we would be able to maximise our economic potential through the new Authority, while 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and of those who chose to comment on this question 208 did so positively, 282 negatively.

Similarly, when asked to what extent would they agree or disagree with the proposal to address our housing pressures through the new Authority, 46% agreed or strongly agreed, while 43% disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 219 positive and supportive comments being received compared to 280 opposing the proposals.

Only 40% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that we would be able to meet our net zero ambitions through the new Authority. By comparison 43% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 190 respondent offered supportive comments, 280 concluded otherwise.

There was marginally greater support for the proposal to deliver investment in Devon and Torbay through the new Authority, with 46% either agreeing or strongly agreeing and 43% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, but again there were more comments received opposing the proposal (276) than those supporting it (222).

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More remarkably only 49% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal that the new Authority would support industries that are important to Devon and Torbay by creating a strong and sustainable local economy. It is a worry to think anybody might think any new Authority would do otherwise. Yet despite 238 supportive comments being received with only 149 opposed, the fact that as many as 39% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea the new Authority would have a positive economic impact is indicative that many remain unconvinced by what is on offer.

If further support for this supposition were needed, then only 36% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed delivery arrangements – in other words how the new authority would go about its business, to whom it would be accountable, how it would be constituted, and who would be taking the decisions. By comparison 48% disagreed or strongly disagreed and, of the comments received, only 163 were supportive while 308 were opposed.

So, taken overall, only one of the seven proposals enjoyed the support or more than 50% of respondents, and with three of the remaining six, only marginally more found themselves in agreement rather than disagreement. However, in three of the seven, more respondents objected than were in favour.

Consequently nobody can claim there is overwhelming support for the new Authority. And it is perhaps interesting to note that even though respondents were asked to make it clear how strongly they agreed or disagreed with any of the proposals, the published consultation feedback report fails to include that breakdown.

Of course, only a conspiracy theorist would suggest the breakdown was omitted because few respondents strongly agreed with any of the proposals, certainly by comparison with the numbers who strongly disagreed. But what is noticeable is that while an overall total 1,815 comments were received from those opposing the proposals, only 1,492 were submitted in support.

In addition, many of the comments the report provides as supportive were heavily qualified. Take for example these two with respect to the delivery arrangements:

While I support the principle of the CCA with no directly elected Mayor, I remain concerned about how this will be funded going forward. Reference is made to capital funding to get things up and running, but there is very little detail as to how the costs of it being administered will be met going forward.

and:

Although I support the proposals I am concerned the new structure will create another level of bureaucracy that will suck up resources.

Or those comments that are supposedly in support of the idea the new Authority will support industries that are important to Devon and Torbay:

Will the CCA be able to use its voice to be an effective tool to attract new investment into public service delivery in a rural area or will it be expected to provide the investment?

and:

There is not enough emphasis on the protection, growth and development of the agricultural industry which is the lifeblood of the South West.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that those examples might be better categorised as raising questions rather than positively offering support. Indeed, amongst the other examples provided elsewhere in the report, many comments not actually disagreeing with a proposal are counted as supportive.

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Of course, one of the reasons why many respondents might still have been posing questions is the fact residents were given no opportunity to ask any questions or obtain clarification about any of the issues being raised, despite Devon County Council Leader John Hart having told the Society, in an email dated 16 February, that 'public consultation meetings (were) being held over the county area'. He also promised to say what the budgeted set-up costs of the CCA would be, its projected annual budget, and the number of full time staff or equivalent it intended to employ.

Yet no list of any meetings that residents could attend was ever published, the consultation feedback report lists none have taken place, and no answers to any of those financial questions were ever received. Perhaps that might be because, according to a representative from either Devon County Council or Torbay Council quoted by the report, none exists – the 'budget for the CCA needs to be worked through once we have final set of proposals.'

Nor is there any certainty as to how the new Authority is to be financed. The report tells us 'there is £1million of new money from Government to resource the CCA in its first year, including initial set up and early running costs. There will then be a discussion with Government about future running costs.'

Or as a representative from either Devon County Council or Torbay Council went on to admit: 'We recognise that this is a high-level concept at the moment. We do not know what further powers and monies will be given to it in the future, so in that respect it is a bit of a leap of faith, but one we believe will benefit Devon and Torbay.'

Again, in response to whether there were any downsides to committing to a CCA structure and were no further government funding to be available, a representative for one of the two councils made the statement 'the Labour Party manifesto is very similar to current Government in terms of devolution. Therefore we have confidence the CCA provides an opportunity for ongoing investment, conversations and dialogue with whoever forms the next Government.'

As a matter of fact, the Labour Party has yet to publish its manifesto. However what we do know is that Sir Keir Starmer has said, according to the Financial Times, that CCAs 'will secure greater control over policies affecting transport, skills, housing, planning, employment support and energy', echoing his previous statement to The Guardian: 'combined authorities would get more control over housing and planning, skills, energy and transport of the kind currently held by London, the West Midlands and Greater Manchester'.

Planning, of course, is currently the responsibility of our District Councils. So it is perhaps not surprising that many of the responses submitted by our town, parish and district councils quoted by the consultation feedback report are far from enthusiastic about the proposed CCA.

Yet despite such widespread lack of support for the proposed new authority, despite the lack of any democratic mandate, and despite nobody knowing what it might actually end up costing, Cllr Hart seems determined to carry on regardless. •