



11 March 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 response**

**The Society's presents its response to this Consultation in the same order as the questions have been posted on the 'Have your say Full consultation' page of the Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal website.**

### **2. Maximising our economic potential**

It is far from obvious how the CCA will maximise the region's economic potential when the only commitment being made by the Government is to devolve the budget for adult education to the Devon and Torbay CCA.

And although it is an admirable objective to:

make sure we have the skilled workforce our local economy needs for the future little will be achieved without knowing both who will be providing those 'additional high value jobs' and what those jobs will be.

Otherwise how will we know what we should be training people to do?

The Consultation states:

The CCA would have direct control over £11 million per year of funding for adult education until 2030. This will enable us to create up to 50,000 new training and re-training opportunities.

It is therefore noticeable that there appears to be no obvious plan to attract additional employment to the area, other than an aspiration to generate additional private sector investment into such areas as environmental science and technology. Without knowing how this is to be done, few if any new jobs are likely to be created, resulting in a large number of people receiving training for no economically beneficial purpose.

There is then also a concern that while the CCA intends to:

work with the Devon and Plymouth Chamber of Commerce providing input to and supporting the development of the Local Skills Improvement Plan for the area. The Plan will help build a stronger and more dynamic partnership between employers and further education providers

the Plymouth and South Devon Freeport Full Business Case has already previously declared:

A Skills Plan will also underpin all activities, ensuring that partners can accelerate higher value employment and training opportunities whilst also enabling new employment and inclusion opportunities, education and career options and wider supply chain innovation activity.

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The Freeport also states that it is to ‘work with the Department for International Trade (DIT) on national and global strategic marketing to attract investment into the area.’

Consequently, unlike the CCA, the Freeport would at least appear to have identified the business sectors it hopes to attract, defined a strategy for doing so, and is offering identifiable economic incentives to encourage companies to come.

The Society therefore **strongly disagrees** with the proposal to maximise our economic potential through the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority when an alternative is already in place. •

### 3. Addressing our housing pressures

Significantly the only funding that might be on offer to address housing pressures is some of the £16 million that could be made available by the Government over the next two years, money which also has to support business to invest in green business transition activity, support the development of green skills capacity building within the Further and Higher education sector, and enable the development of crucial coastal and marine energy infrastructure to allow for the transition to low carbon shipping.

And that proportion of the £16 million that can be allocated to housing has been specifically earmarked to ‘support the development of a small sites Green Homes investment programme’.

In itself that will do nothing to address our housing pressures nor help meet the very real demand for genuinely affordable accommodation.

Instead the Consultation suggests there ‘will be potential investment through current and future funding streams, including the Affordable Homes Programme and Brownfield, Infrastructure and Land Fund’ to address the pressures – and the key word here is ‘potential’, nothing definite is on offer, nothing is guaranteed, and the financial constraints facing both this and any future government could mean such funding is unlikely to be forthcoming.

The Consultation similarly suggests:

The CCA will work with Homes England, with the support of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to combine our skills and capacity to reduce the barriers to affordable housing delivery, regeneration and wider housing growth. We will develop a shared development pipeline which will be underpinned by a clear action plan.

However this is something our existing District Councils are already doing. To quote the Deputy Leader of Devon County Council’s Liberal Democrat group and the Leader of Teignbridge District Council Martin Wrigley, speaking at the DCC Cabinet Meeting on 2 February:

We do a housing event in my district with all our local providers and we had a Homes England representative there who actually knows what we’re doing in the district, who is there working with us. Resetting that relationship is not a good thing. Resetting that relationship through one single body will put us back five years. It won’t take us forward.

Instead, he cautioned:

This could end up with less money from Homes England for building affordable homes in Devon if we’re not very careful.

Housing is an issue that should be left with each of the District Councils, who know their own area and its needs far better than any Authority, possibly located many miles away, can ever hope.

Consequently the Society **strongly disagrees** with the proposal to address our housing pressures through the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. •



#### 4. Improving local transport

With Plymouth having opted out of the proposed Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and given that the Leader of Devon County Council is previously on record as saying:

Ironically we work together on this already

it is open to question what, if anything, the new authority will be able to add, particularly given that much of the known future economic development in the area is likely to be taking place in and around the Freeport, the greater part of which is located in or in close proximity to Plymouth. And, if that's where jobs are going to be found, that will be where many residents and others need to travel.

Consequently, without the participation of Plymouth, it is hard to see how the CCA can effectively develop an area-wide Local Transport Plan that the Department for Transport can use as a basis for future local transport investment, if indeed the Department is given access to sufficient funding to make that investment.

It is also not obvious what improvement the CCA can make to subsidised bus services and concessionary fare schemes and potholes will not be amongst its responsibilities.

The Society can find no evidence and therefore **strongly disagrees** that it will be possible to improve local transport through the creation of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. •

#### 5. Meeting our net zero ambitions

Some of the £16 million in funding that may be available to the proposed CCA from the Government over the next two years has been earmarked to both support business to invest in green business transition activity and to support the development of green skills capacity building within the further and higher education sector.

However that funding, limited as it is, will only be forthcoming 'subject to the development of a detailed business case'. In other words, the Government has to approve both how and on what it is to be spent.

Nor can there be any confidence that further funding will be on offer after two years. So while a small amount of money might make a small amount of difference, the ongoing expense of the CCA could well reduce whatever funds both Devon County Council and Torbay Council currently have to help meet net zero.

Until the next government's aims and objectives are known following the forthcoming election the Society **neither agrees or disagrees** that we should try to meet our net zero ambitions through the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. •

#### 6. Meeting our net zero ambitions

Apart from direct control over £11 million per year of funding for adult education until 2030 and possible access to some £16 million in Government funding that might be made available over the next two years to:

- support the development of a small sites Green Homes investment programme
- support business to invest in green business transition activity,
- support the development of green skills capacity building within the Further and Higher education sector
- enable the development of crucial coastal and marine energy infrastructure to allow for the transition to low carbon shipping

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the CCA, the Consultation tells us, could also be given delivery responsibility from 2025/2026 for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (or its successor).

But again there are no guarantees. And nor is there any suggestion as to what the overall size of the Fund then will be or what share of that Fund the CCA might enjoy.

So once again, in two years time, Devon County Council and Torbay Council may be left having to meet the ongoing expense of the CCA with no money from the government, other than that allocated for adult education until 2030, to provide any means of delivering investment in Devon and Torbay.

Consequently, until such time as the next government's aims and objectives and the amount of funding that will be available following the forthcoming election are known, the Society **strongly disagrees** with the proposal to deliver investment in Devon and Torbay through the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. •

## 7. Creating a strong and sustainable local economy

Over the next two years part of the £16 million in Government funding that might be made available is earmarked to:

enable the development of crucial coastal and marine energy infrastructure to allow for the transition to low carbon shipping.

Other than that the CCA will, at its own expense:

support high growth business sectors such as marine engineering, defence, photonics and digital, as well as our traditional strengths of tourism, agritech and food production.

This will obviously come at a cost. And it appears that cost will have to be met by Devon County Council and Torbay Council.

Until the Society can know who the CCA intends to employ to deliver on those objectives, what their qualifications and previous track record might be, and what costs will be incurred, the Society has no option but to **strongly disagree** with the proposal that the CCA will effectively support industries that are important to Devon and Torbay. •

## 8. Delivering Our Ambitions

On page 4 you state:

Funding to establish the CCA would be provided by the Government.

In reality the government is only committed to providing:

£250,000 of Capacity Funding in 2024/25, £500,000 in 2025/26 and £250,000 in 2026/27.

It is impossible to believe that the new Authority will cost less to run in year three than it might in year two, and it is equally improbable that the money on offer will meet the full costs of getting the new Authority up and running with a full complement of staff on board.

But even were the Society to agree with any proposal to create a new layer of local government prior to the forthcoming general election, only after which will it be possible to know both what the next government intends as well as what if any funding might be made available to the CCA in the future, serious concerns remain.

According to paragraph 18 of the 'Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal' the Devon and Torbay CCA will comprise:

- Six constituent members appointed by the two constituent councils (Devon County Council and Torbay Council), with each constituent council appointing three of their

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elected members. Each constituent council will appoint one Lead Member (normally the Leader) and two further members nominated by the Leader of each constituent council.

- Four non-constituent members, of which two will be members nominated by the District councils within the Devon area to act as District representatives.
- Two associate members as decided by the CCA. One of these members will represent the voice of business and another the skills/education sector.
- the Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Commissioner

However, although the CCA is to be made of up of constituent and non-constituent members, the decision making will be split between reserved and general matters.

Decisions on reserved matters will be for constituent members only and will require a simple majority of constituent council members to vote in favour.

Those reserved matters will include the election of the chair, agreement of the annual budget, the policy framework, the scrutiny arrangements and all major investment decisions.

So although the Consultation claims:

The governance model proposed would build upon existing structures and recognises the significant role for the eight district councils

six of the eight District councils will have no direct representation, while their two representatives will have no control over any reserved matters.

Separately the Conservatives currently remain the two largest parties on both Devon County Council and Torbay Council, which means the Leader of the CCA will be a Conservative, and paragraph 23 of the 'Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal' states:

To provide leadership of the CCA Board, the CCA will also appoint one of the Leader Members to act as Chair of the Board. This role will be subject to nomination and approval on a biennial basis.

The next Devon County Council elections are to take place in May 2024, Torbay in May 2027. Following those elections, and if the 2023 District Council elections are any guide, in little over a year the Conservatives may no longer control Devon. Yet because the Chair of the CCA Board is to remain in post for two years, that individual may well no longer be the Leader of their Constituent Council.

Consequently not only could there be a conflict between the political objectives of the Chair of the CCA and the Leader of one or more of the Constituent Councils, with the danger that party political considerations could on occasion come in to play, particularly whenever elections approach, but the political make-up of the District Councils may be less than adequately represented on the CCA.

Separately the Devolution FAQs page of the Devon and Torbay Devolution Deal website disingenuously responds to the question 'Will there be a rise in Council Tax?':

It will not mean a rise in Council Tax. There is no option to add the cost of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority onto Council Tax bills.

Yet Section 16(1) of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act clearly states:

The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision: (a) for the costs of a CCA to be met by its constituent councils, and (b) about the basis on which the amount payable by each constituent council is to be determined.

In other words it is hard to see how, given that both Constituent Councils primarily derive their funding from Council Tax and given that no government funds, other than for adult education and £250K in Year Three, are guaranteed after Year Two, there is every probability that Council Tax payers will be left footing the bill for the CCA in years Three and beyond.

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As a result, for these and other reasons, the Society **strongly disagrees** with the proposed delivery arrangements for the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. •

## 9. Your Comments

Although the Consultation suggests that over the next two years some £16 million might be made available to the CCA for certain specified projects any money will only be forthcoming 'subject to the development of a detailed business case'. In other words, the Government has to approve both how and on what any funding is to be spent.

Yet even if the Government gives approval to each of the plans put forward by the CCA, paragraph 131 of the proposed Devolution Deal makes it clear that:

any issues of concern with the subsequent delivery of this deal will be escalated to ministers and leaders to resolve, in keeping with the letter and spirit of devolution.

Or, to put it another way, should ministers not fully concur with what the CCA is doing they can simply take over, 'in keeping with the letter and spirit of devolution'!

Consequently the 'devolution' on offer is hardly the transfer or delegation of power to a lower level. Actual control will remain where it always has been.

Instead the CCA will effectively be no more than an arguably unnecessary additional layer of bureaucracy for which no mandate exists, that is being imposed on residents through a "consultation" offering no opportunity to opt out, and for which residents will no doubt end up having to pay.

Worse, the CCA will yet usurp some crucial functions currently the responsibility of the District Councils. Page 6 of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority – Draft Proposal, attached to the 2 February DCC Cabinet Reports Pack, noted:

The devolution partners recognise that devolution is a journey, not a one-off event. This proposal is anticipated to be the first step in the process of further devolution. As institutions mature, they can gain greater responsibility and Devon and Torbay will be able to deepen its devolution arrangements over time, subject to Government agreement.

While elsewhere Sir Kier Starmer has been quoted by The Guardian as saying:

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.

And although planning is as yet not part of the CCA's remit, that could change.

The proposed CCA is a leap – and possibly a dangerous leap, in to the unknown, with few if any benefits immediately apparent. Considerably more information needs to be made available, and only then residents should be given the opportunity to vote on whether or not they wish to participate.

As Cllr Frank Biederman, Leader of the Independent Group on Devon County Council, told his fellow councillors on 2 February:

All I see is the creation of another level of government that will spiral out of control as more and more staff are brought in to run it and support it. My advice is let's bin this quango and wait and see what the next government's priorities are.

Advice with which the Society can only agree. •