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The Council House  
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## **Response to the Boundary Committee's call for concept proposals on the future pattern of local government for the county of Devon, and Plymouth and Torbay Unitary Authorities.**

The proposal is *to maintain unitary authorities for Plymouth and Torbay on their current boundaries, create a unitary authority for Exeter on its current district council boundary and to create a unitary council for the remainder of the County of Devon.*

This proposal reflects the predominantly rural nature of the Country of Devon but also supports the principal urban areas and growth points of Plymouth (the largest city on the South Coast of England), Exeter and Torbay.

The proposal will mean the abolition of the district councils of South Hams, Teignbridge, Torrington, West Devon, Mid Devon, North Devon, Exeter and East Devon.

### **Meeting the Boundary Committee criteria**

#### **Affordable and met from existing councils resource envelope.**

The proposals meet these criteria from the ongoing savings associated with moving to a unitary system of government for one of England's largest counties. Allowing for a modest re-investment in neighbourhood empowerment, the opportunities for smarter procurement, the reduction in the administrative burden and cost of maintaining a network of almost 300 councillors should ensure affordability going forward. There cannot be any question of the existing authorities being unviable – they all have unqualified accounts from the District Auditor. The only outstanding issue is whether the Committee is willing to accept the fact that the substantial savings offered by the abolition of the districts will meet the criteria when applied to the global proposal for unitary Devon, Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter.

#### **Supported by a broad cross section of partners and stakeholders**

The Committee is already aware of the strength of feeling in Exeter for their desire to become a unitary authority. There has been no call in Plymouth for changes to the boundaries in the 10 years since becoming a unitary council and Torbay has embraced its new identity with confidence by choosing the elected mayor form of executive government. The current District Councils' boundaries are poorly-defined (with the exception of the city of Exeter) and are unable to provide a sense of place or community cohesion.

*Future unitary local government structures are to:*

**Provide strong, effective, accountable strategic leadership, including that strong economic leadership recognised in the Government Review of sub national economic development and regeneration**

The concept proposed meets this criteria. The real influence of Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter are clearly reflected in the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Regional Economic Strategy. Plymouth has been in receipt of regeneration funds including an NDC, 7 rounds of SRB and Objective 2 funding and has agreed, deliverable plans to achieve significant job growth within its existing boundaries (30,000 new jobs by 2020). It has recently set up a City Development Company, (with EP and the SWRDA) based on the city boundary to support this delivery. Exeter is one of the fastest growing cities in terms of economic performance. Plymouth is one of the few cities in the country to have its LDF and core strategy accepted without significant revision. Thanks to close ties with the RDA, the presence of English Partnerships and other key agencies, both cities and Torbay have a clear sense of purpose and direction.

Changing boundaries now would have a detrimental effect of the prospects of the sub-region and would be hugely damaging for Cornwall, Britain's only Objective 1 area. Along with Torbay, all would suffer greatly from any dilution via a bolting on of rural hinterland either from blurring of sparsity/density formulas or masking deprivation and so reducing EU and government funding.

**Deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment, in particular for empowering citizens and communities and the LGA's Action Plan for Community Empowerment: building on success**

The Committee has already taken some bold decisions in neighbouring areas to Devon in the South West of England. Wiltshire and Cornwall will be predominately rural unitary councils, and both areas are currently working through issues of community empowerment. Whilst it would be inappropriate to describe such a system for a revised Devon at this stage, we understand that the Committee would welcome our suggestions of how it could work.

Exeter, like Plymouth is not parished. However, the county is and also has a network of market and coastal towns – 26 in all – which have a regeneration and development plan agreed by principal stakeholders. The identity of these towns is strong – with some of Britain's most famous names amongst them. These places provide a greater sense of identity for the people who live in them that any local government administrative boundary.

We would therefore support the remaining Devon – minus Exeter - becoming a unitary county but with some devolution to local areas, town and parish councils along the same models that are currently being investigated and implemented in other unitary rural counties like Cornwall and Wiltshire. In many respects this ready-made geography is stronger than any artificial “super-output area” or “guide neighbourhood” construct but is entirely consistent with Government policy for bottom up solutions and devolution to the local level within a unitary framework.

**Deliver value for money and equity on public services**

Size and shape are no guarantors of deliverability on this. There are countless examples of large authorities providing good VFM and poor VFM. Similarly, claims made that small unitaries are unable to deliver excellence in key services like children’s and adult social care are not supported by evidence. Size and shape are no guides to performance.

Critical success factors in local government depend in large part on sound management, sensible politics and a genuine partnership on resource prioritisation between elected members and senior managers.