



# News Service

**10 April 2008**

BIG ENOUGH TO WORK, SMALL ENOUGH TO CONNECT

## **EDDC proposes four unitary councils for Devon**

FOUR UNITARY authorities in Devon could transform local government in the county for the benefit of its citizens, the businesses that are located here and the partners, including central government, with whom local authorities work.

Following extensive consultation, that is the concept being proposed by East Devon District Council in its submission to the Boundary Committee, which has been appointed by the Government to look at alternative council formations.

EDDC's proposal includes the formation of an Exeter/Eastern Devon unitary authority, on the basis that a council of this size would be big enough to be strategic and small enough to relate to local communities.

The review, which follows Exeter City Council's unsuccessful bid last year for unitary status, means that all of Devon's councils must submit their ideas for how a possible shift to unitary government might work – and retaining the current system is not an option the Committee will entertain.

By tomorrow (Friday 11 April), the Boundary Committee will have received submissions from all Devon's councils, including Plymouth and Torbay, which are already unitary councils and will remain so. After consideration and further public consultation, the Boundary Committee will make a recommendation to the Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in December.

EDDC is proposing the replacement of nine local authorities in Devon by two new unitary authorities and the expansion of two existing authorities (Plymouth and Torbay) that can collectively meet the needs and expectations of residents, customers and government for the future of this area and the region.

Under the EDDC proposals, the four authorities would be:

- **Exeter/Eastern Devon** – approximate population 300,000.
- **Barnstaple/Northern Devon** – will ensure clarity of focus and ensure that the new council will have a single area of focus thus overcoming the years of frustration whereby Exeter has been the dominant focus of the county. Approximate population 240,000.
- **Plymouth/Western Devon** – approximate population 310,000, taking in Tavistock and Ivybridge.
- **Torbay/Southern Devon** – helping to ensure that the council can better serve its hinterland for the benefit of the overall economy. Approximate population 275,000.

As part of EDDC's consultation, the Council canvassed five possible options for discussion purposes. The clear preference of consultees, assuming unitary is the only option, was a 'conceptual option' for four unitary authorities based on the four primary travel-to-work areas or Zones of Influence that exist within the County reflecting the economic centres of Barnstaple, Exeter, Plymouth and Torbay. This is therefore the option that we have endorsed based on this feedback and the key factors/building blocks referred to above.

Councillor Sara Randall Johnson, Leader of EDDC, said: "In taking this initial concept through to a worked up preferred option, we are clear that it can deliver on our vision but more importantly go beyond 'joining up the work' of eleven existing local authorities.

"In their place could be a virtual public service for residents and customers, to be created with public sector partners in each area. We have studied those recent unitary bids that have been successful and we are confident of the robustness of the unitary proposals we are putting forward".

She added that EDDC's 'travel-to-work area' solution was similar to those proposed by Plymouth and Torbay in their submissions to the Boundary Committee for their areas.

The EDDC proposal reflects the spacial strategy set out in the draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), which recognises the role of strategically significant cities and towns in

driving economic growth and housing growth, and the sub divisions of the county set out in Devon County Council's Local Transport Plan's.

Turning to the specific Exeter/ Eastern Devon proposal, EDDC says the vision for eastern Devon is that it should improve the quality of life and opportunities for those living in the whole area, conserving its historic heritage, and enhancing its environment.

The eastern Devon area should be developed so that the range, quality and scale of cultural, retail and other facilities enhance the strategic needs of the wider sub region.

The eastern Devon area will be a focus for strategic economic development.

opportunities for job growth within Exeter and the other main towns in the area should be promoted and encouraged, reducing existing imbalances between population and employment and reducing dependence on commuting.

The vision for the area also seeks to improve the quality of life and opportunities within the other communities in the sub region. While local employment opportunities, facilities and services in these communities should be enhanced, improvements should also be put in place to complement transport links between these settlements and Exeter, particularly public transport links and rail services.

### **Clear benefits**

Councillor Randall Johnson added: "Our vision is about the future of local government, not self-preservation. Both East Devon DC and Exeter CC have established reputations as deliverers of good high quality services but with a low council tax. Neither of the two councils could be described as proponents of high tax and hyperbole. This will be to the benefit of those current residents of Mid Devon DC and Teignbridge DC who would form part of a new authority but would also see clear benefits in terms of their levels of council tax.

"An eastern Devon unitary is a natural public service area that will enable strong relationships between local public agencies and a new level in shared and joined up services, particularly because this spatial integrity reinforces how people live their lives and interact.

"This is reflected in the Exeter and Heart of Devon Economic Partnership, the Exeter sub region in the Devon Local Transport Plan, the circulation of the Express & Echo and numerous other indicators. In other words, a virtual unitary public service that will have:

- spatial Integrity – based on “real” place
- geographic cohesion
- accessible transport linkages.

“We believe that the four unitary option is affordable, offers excellent value for money and will have a beneficial impact on council tax levels for future years. We conclude that four unitary authorities in Devon will strike the best balance between these factors and be the best solution based on the criteria of this review”.

### **Ends**

You can read more about the EDDC submission in a dedicated section on the Council’s website at:

[http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/new\\_councils\\_for\\_devon - have your say.htm](http://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/new_councils_for_devon_-_have_your_say.htm)

### **EDITORS’ NOTES**

Please see below further information for journalists about the EDDC submission

#### **Key factors**

In considering what a new pattern of unitary local government should seek to achieve EDDC acknowledged the following as key factors/building blocks:

- Areas that are meaningful to their residents and reflect physical and socio-economic geography in terms of the ways in which people live, move around and work.
- Lean, low-cost but high quality authorities that will deliver significant savings to the public purse.
- Authorities of a suitable size to provide coherent and powerful voices at regional and national levels and which can effectively place shape.
- Strong visible and accountable leadership for the community balanced by a stronger role for non-executive councillors.
- A model of service delivery and governance that provides for services to be shared where possible, commissioned if appropriate, delivered cost effectively and consistently and where accountability and decision making are devolved to the lowest level possible.
- Tangible and meaningful community empowerment including participatory budgeting, the transfer of assets to community and voluntary organisations and encouraging their involvement in service design.

- Radical devolution to parishes and if a parish structure is not appropriate then to neighbourhoods (local knowledge is paramount).
- Structures that facilitate the transformation of Devon's relatively weaker economic areas into strong, vibrant and successful business environments.
- Equality based services that promote community cohesion.
- The ability to influence shared service boundaries to drive accountability and responsibility across the public sector.
- Councils to be of a similar size so they can have an equal voice in any joint service arrangements.

## Benefits

There is a need for local resident, community-centred governance, balanced with the need for creating organisations of sufficient strategic capacity to attract high calibre members and officers to work with partners to shape the future of the area and the sub-regions and regions in which they will operate. EDDC believes the four unitary option does this well and also delivers considerable savings over the current structure for investment in the future.

It promises to deliver a number of benefits:

- Benefits to all stakeholders
- Benefits to people and communities
- Benefits for parish councils
- Benefits for local voluntary and community sector partners
- Benefits for local public sector partners
- Benefits for regional and sub regional partners
- Benefits for Government

## Consultation

EDDC carried out four consultation events. The first was on 6 March at the AGM of the East Devon Business Forum. Present at that meeting were representatives from some 23 businesses in East Devon.

In addition, EDDC held three consultation events on 13, 18 and 19 March to which the Council invited all district councillors, town and parish councillors, voluntary and community sector partners, other partners and members of the public. In all some 153 representatives signed in as attending.

The East Devon Business Forum was unanimous in supporting the option of four unitary councils. The majority of other consultees also supported this option.

## Financial benefits

EDDC is confident that the four unitary option will deliver demonstrable financial benefits. Although detailed savings and budgets will need to be prepared the Council is confident in setting prudent targets that will ensure:

- ongoing gross savings in excess of £20m per year from 2013/14 from senior management, support services and democratic arrangements;
- all costs of transition and shadow authority costs being recovered in four years;
- council tax levels being harmonised to the lowest level in each Unitary Authority;
- further ongoing savings based on a history and tradition within both East Devon DC and Exeter CC of careful control of costs.

In addition, the four unitary authority solution will deliver further efficiencies in front line services. At this stage, a prudent target of £8m annual savings is assumed, with further savings possible from enhanced procurement and rationalisation of office and other accommodation.

Finally, a unification of service delivery at a local level will also reduce the liaison and consultation costs for our partners in all other sectors. In line with the guidance EDDC has not modelled any of these savings but assumes they would contribute to the Gershon targets for each authority.

## Timetable

**The timetable for the Boundary Committee's review shown in the table below:**

Stage One	3 March – 11 April	Concepts for new unitary authorities relating to five criteria. Finance briefing for section 151 officers
Stage Two	14 April – 4 July	BC considers concepts and seeks information from local authorities and other stakeholders
<b>Draft Proposals Published</b>		
Stage Three	7 July – 26 Sept.	Consultation on draft proposals, including boundaries Affordability information provided by Local authorities
Stage Four	29 Sept. – 19 Dec.	Stage Three information considered by BC. Further information requested, as necessary
<b>Advice provided to Secretary of State</b>		