

A letter from Sara Randall Johnson, the Leader of East Devon District Council, to the Editor of the Western Morning News questioning the first financial assessments of reshaping local government in Devon, was published on 22 September.

It reads:

“Devon County Council’s financial assessment of proposals to create the second largest council in the country reveals that it would take 4 years before the costs of change are outweighed by the projected savings. Only in 2015 would a mammoth Devon unitary council generate regular annual savings.

The estimated savings of £19 million are from a gross combined revenue budget of £517 million. Savings in the order of 3.6% are similar to the efficiency target currently facing all councils which can be delivered within the existing local government system through careful budgeting.

To put this sum into further context, it would take 32 years for the projected annual savings to pay off Devon County Council’s current debt of £614 million.

Yet can we even afford to accept the County Council’s own figures and assumptions? As County employees have been advised: “It is important to remember that the financial case being put forward represents an initial view and is based on indicative figures only, with much more detailed work to be done”. Evidence from Cornwall, where the unitary experiment is already under way, shows that alleged cost-saving and efficiency-promoting moves are already costing half a million pounds in re-branding and local elections are under threat of delays.

Even the County’s promises behind its figures and assumptions are not cast in stone. A new unitary will not be bound to implement what it is proposing to the Boundary Committee as has been demonstrated in Northumberland and Durham where the new unitary councils have torn up their plans for Community Boards.

All that the County Council is promising to deliver in terms of savings for residents is a council tax that matches the county’s current lowest rate. For residents of East Devon in a typical Band D home, that equates to a saving of just £3 a year. Should it be a proud boast of Devon County Council that it is offering a saving of a penny a day to the 62,000 households within the East Devon?

Is it worth all the disruption that years of local government reorganisation will cause to save each householder less than a penny a day? I don’t think so!”