

Cllr John Hart, Leader of Devon County Council
Cllr David Thomas, Leader of Torbay Council



29 February 2024

Dear Cllr Hart and Cllr Thomas

DEVON AND TORBAY DEVOLUTION CONSULTATION

We are writing in response to the draft proposals for a Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority which are currently subject to public consultation.

The Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC) is a recognised member and support organisation representing the interests of parish and town councils (PTCs) in Devon. PTCs are the first tier of local government and the closest to our communities, providing our towns and villages with a democratically accountable voice, along with structure and leadership to deliver local services and champion what matters to local people.

PTCs are interested in a range of matters relating to the proposals for a Combined County Authority (CCA) which will be responsible for delivery, implementation, and oversight of a Devolution Deal in Devon. DALC's response aims to reflect the PTC sector as a whole and does not necessarily reflect the views of individual PTCs. The key themes considered as part of this response were: governance and decision-making, resources, and engagement with PTCs and communities.

GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING

DALC is an advocate for greater local autonomy of government powers, funding, and functions, and believes decision-making at the local level achieves better outcomes for communities. In principle, DALC is supportive of the transfer of functions and funding from central government to local government.

DALC believes that democratic accountability is important for the delivery and oversight of government functions. A CCA will provide an accountable body, constituted by representatives nominated by Devon County Council and Torbay Council, providing democratically appointed leadership. DALC welcomes and supports the consensus approach to decision-making, in particular the absence of a casting vote for the chairman. The CCA model is preferable to previous structures, such as the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership, which had significant influence over economic development of the area, with lesser democratic involvement.

DALC recognises the importance of wider democratic involvement into the delivery and oversight of government functions. When all tiers of local government work collaboratively, there is greater trust and confidence in each other to deliver their respective functions effectively, independently or in partnership, to meet community needs. We welcome and support proposals to establish a Team Devon Joint Committee, of which DALC would be a member representing the PTC sector. DALC recommends the membership of the Joint Committee includes both CEOs and Leaders of the participating bodies, to ensure democratic and operational input, and all parties to have equal voting rights. DALC calls for its engagement in and/or consultation on the terms of reference of the Joint Committee in future.

DALC encourages the broadening of democratic involvement further by engaging with PTCs directly, particularly on locality/place-based matters. DALC wishes to see further engagement and/or consultation with us regarding engagement frameworks. DALC offers its support to facilitate greater democratic involvement into the CCAs decision making processes. We could, through a seat on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, provide a valuable stakeholder perspective on the effectiveness of how the CCA engages with the PTC sector.

RESOURCES

The proposals suggest the CCA will build on existing structures and expertise. A programme team is identified in the transition arrangements, staffing will be required for the transferred transport functions, and DALC anticipates a few statutory roles such as Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer to manage the CCA's operations. DALC seeks more information of the resource requirements for the CCA in the short and longer term, and how these requirements will be met, especially relating to HR, so the constituent councils staffing is not compromised.

There is concern for the sustainability of the proposed CCA. To be effective the CCA must be adequately resourced in the longer term. DALC understands that £1m has been allocated from government for capacity building up to 2026/27, and the CCA will be unable to raise a precept through council tax. DALC would prefer longer term financial support from government, and/or assurances that the CCA will be able to sustain itself post 2026/27 without significant top slicing of funds intended to support Devon's communities. DALC would not support proposals for the constituent councils to fund the CCA as this would mean additional financial burdens on existing budgets, and ultimately our taxpayers.

DALC is concerned about the short-term nature of government funding, and the risks this presents for delivering longer term objectives effectively. A multi-year funding approach would support the CCA to deliver longer term programmes for the benefit of Devon's communities.

A considerable proportion of the Deal establishes partnerships with government departments and/or other agencies, without additional funding. DALC advocates the importance of partnership working, and the added value which can be achieved through collaboration. DALC recognises that formalising these partnerships through a deal agreement can support the development of new initiatives and projects, which could include further devolution and/or investment/funding in future. In principle, DALC is supportive of these partnerships, but would welcome insight into the CCA's key performance indicators which will be used to assess the effectiveness and success of these relationships as they progress.

ENGAGEMENT

A Devolution Deal between central and local government does not in itself require any particular engagement to occur between the CCA and PTCs. DALC understands the majority of functions devolved to the CCA will be delivered through existing structures within the constituent councils, and/or their partners i.e. housing via district councils, and as such, PTCs can expect engagement to be consistent with current practices, which in DALC's view will be a missed opportunity.

PTCs are a natural focus of public activity and service delivery in their communities and are passionate about tackling local issues. They aspire to deliberate and work in partnership with those bodies who have responsibilities for functions in their areas. DALC is aware there is growing discontent within the PTC sector about the quality of relationships between PTCs and the constituent councils at the current time, citing issues such as: PTCs not feeling recognised or appreciated as the first tier of local

government and a democratic voice for their community and champions for matters of local importance; lack of engagement/partnership working with the constituent councils; and poor communication and information sharing from those councils. The depth of feeling varies between councils, departments, and individual personnel (both councillors and officers).

DALC's aim is to see relationships between the constituent councils and PTCs improved and strengthened, with PTCs recognised as equal partners and valued stakeholders in Devon's local government structure. DALC urges the constituent councils to reevaluate how they engage with PTCs, and consider how PTCs can be involved and communicate their views on matters of importance to their communities. This, we believe, will help build trust and confidence in the new CCA to deliver its ambitions within the Devolution Deal.

DALC expects further engagement and consultation regarding future communication/engagement plans and is willing and prepared to support both the CCA, and the constituent councils independently, to identify and facilitate initiatives to improve their relationships with PTCs.

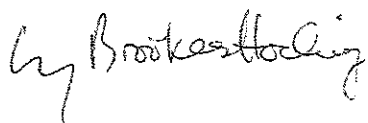
GENERAL COMMENTS

DALC recognises that the creation of a new CCA is not a one-off event but the beginning of the journey. As such, there is not the detail available yet about the CCAs plans and processes. This makes it challenging to assess what impact the CCA and Devolution Deal will have for Devon's communities. DALC anticipates and will welcome opportunities to engage and be consulted on future plans.

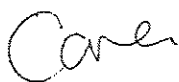
DALC recognises that the government's devolution agenda continues to evolve, and the creation of a CCA creates a structure by which central and local government can work closer together and has the potential to create further devolution opportunities in future. As such DALC supports in principle the creation of a CCA for the potential future opportunities it may bring.

DALC welcomes opportunities to explore further devolution opportunities within our existing local government structure, to empower the first tier of local government which are the councils closest to communities, and strengthen their influence over public service delivery. We advocate for direct access to, and/or devolved government funding and enabling powers for PTCs where they demonstrate clear to benefits communities.

Kind regards



Elizabeth Brookes-Hocking, Chair of the Board of Directors



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