

Devolution and the White Paper -Smaller Council Meeting

Thursday 30 January 2025

Liz Brookes-Hocking, Chair of DALC opened the meeting and discussed the slides presented.

Additional comments from Liz

To-date:

- DCC has welcomed proposals and has applied to be in the first wave. Jim McMahon has advised that proposal bids for unitary status must have 500,000 minimum to be viable. Neither Plymouth nor Torbay or Exeter do. However, Jim has also said there may be some wriggle room.
- Exeter has put forward an Exeter City Unitary.
- DALC has no idea what the district councils are considering. We are anticipating initial proposals by mid March. None of the Devon districts agree with one unitary council.
- DCC elections may be postponed if DCC are accepted in the initial tranche.
- By early summer. The White Paper will become a Bill.
- All areas will need to have submitted proposals by autumn.

What is DALC doing so far?

- All CALCs are working together and sharing knowledge/good practice.
- A NALC briefing in February
- A DCC briefing in February
- Districts are not engaging yet.
- Evidence gathering from P/T councils to use to help steer NALC and lobby accordingly
- Regular feedback to member councils.

The meeting was opened to the representatives of the smaller councils attending to give feedback. This has been summarized as a question or a consideration around devolution.

Questions

1. There is a concern that Parish councils are currently overlooked and consider themselves “on the fringe” and undervalued. How can Parish councils highlight their role in their communities and how will this change when working with one Unitary Council?

Response: *DALC will be an arm to help lift the profile of parish and town councils. Liz asked for evidence of the work local parish and town councils are doing and strive to do in the future. DALC will collate this information and lobby the appropriate bodies using this evidence.*

2. What happens in situations where parish councils are currently in the process of arranging asset transfers with their district councils. Should they carry on with this work?

Response: *It is currently “work as usual” and that is all we know.*

3. a. Do we know if the Combined authority with Devon and Torbay is continuing?

Response: *This continues the current trajectory. In the longer-term government will have CCA's sitting over the top of Unitary Councils– Although if a single unitary covering Devon and Torbay came about we do not know yet the differences between that and the CCA*

b. Will parish/town councils be given additional Powers?

Response: *We currently do not know. NALC will seek to raise the profiles of T/P councils.*

4. We are concerned about asset transfers and the P/T councils will be obliged to take on extra work. Can we lobby about this matter?

Response: *We do not have the plan now. We are communicating with other CALC's to try and understand more. Upper tier councils will not be able to just "drop" services on to P/T councils, but they may apply pressure. This is why it is important that Parishes are involved in the early stages.*

5. How will we pay for additional resources?

Response: *The Precept will pay.*

6. What will happen to resilience work?

Response: *We do not know this yet.*

7. The strategic model in the White Paper does not fit Devon. What is DALC doing to engage Devon's MP's?

Response: *We have not engaged with MPs yet. This is one of the reasons we are asking each council to set out a statement. We can then use this evidence when approaching Devon MP's. One side of A4 – 1. What makes your Council tick/what is important to your community, 2. What are you (P/T council) currently doing in your community and 3. What do you aspire to do in your community? By Mid Feb please.*

8. We are concerned that P/T councils are being asked already to take on more and more from the districts. One comment the district makes is that we do not have our precept capped, hence we can raise councils tax funding further. Our fear is that the precept for P/T councils could start to be capped. Our fear is that we will take on more responsibility, then have our precept capped and be unable to fund these services.

Response: *NALC continually lobbies for "No Capping" and so far, nationally, there isn't any evidence that P/T councils have abused the no capping rule.*

9. Can individual T/P councils lobby their local MP themselves?

Response: *Yes, but please copy DALC in.*

10. If a Unitary council goes ahead, what will happen to individual district council's reserves?

Response: *We imagine that they may go into a "Devon" pot.*

11. Are the parish boundaries likely to change as well: DALC will put this forward as a question.

12. Neighborhood Plan: WE are on a journey to create out NP – Do we continue with this work?

Response: *We understand that districts have been advised to continue with Local Plans. The government is still in favour of NPs*

13. Where do the National Parks fit in?

Response: *We understand they will be linked to the CCA. Specifically, they are Associate Members of the Joint Committee (as is DALC), part of whose role is to advise the CCA.*

Observations from participants

1. Services and asset transfer

Statement: We could ask Cornwall for feedback on their experience.

2. The part played and opportunities for town and parish councils and what can be done now.

Statement: P/T councils need to make a challenge and in doing so is an opportunity to be heard.

Statement: It might be an idea for DALC to collate a “Knowledge Bank” of how to run the various discretionary services by collecting information from councils who already do this work. For example, running allotments and street lights

Statement: Now is the time to map asset management and include what work is done “in kind” at local level.

3. Representation

Statement: We are concerned that one Unitary will not be able to keep in touch with the number of P/T councils across Devon and these councils will feel increasingly marginalised.

Statement: We do not think the government is concerned about consultation and has little regard for P/T Councils. We must raise our profile. We will have more time to do this if Devon is not accepted in the first tranche.

Statement: We need to push for better inclusion and more information.

4. Other

Statement: If there is no DCC election in May, councilors may stand down anyway if they were working towards this being the end of their term.

Statement: Districts may struggle to recruit over these next few years.

Follow-up actions

Members to:

- Create a statement about what is important in their communities, what you already do, and what you would like to do in the future. Send that to DALC (enquiries@devonalc.org.uk) to help Liz build an evidence base.
- Councils to establish their parish/town’s priorities.

- Now is the time for council's asset map and include what work is done "in kind" at local level. Start considering what councils may want to take on and what they don't. This might include consulting with the community.

DALC to

- Compile statements from individual P/T councils to establish evidence to support claims that P/T councils are doing excellent work across Devon:
- Lobby Devon MP's (DALC) and Central Government (NALC) to raise the profile of town and parish councils. Using evidenced based information demonstrate what T/P councils are currently doing, stress the importance of this work and lobby for early engagement
- Keep members updated
- Circulate slides from Justin (NALC), Cornish devo report, and more information as we have it (I do not have slides yet).
- Request the Leader of DCC attends a meeting of all the P/T councils in Devon and reports on the current situation.

DALC to ask NALC:

- Lobby for an increased appreciation of all that P/T councils are doing and for early engagement.
- Justin (NALC) attends a meeting in February of all the P/T councils in Devon to give NALC update in.
- Guidance re-devolution of assets.
- Some examples of best practice in devolution/local government reorganisation.

Some unanswered questions:

- Are boundary changes likely?
- Establish any mechanism for devolution of services from districts to P/T councils, taking account of funding, viability, and whether services must be taken on.
- How will a Unitary Council ensure against marginalisation over a large geographical and rural area in Devon?
- Parishes will have to take on more responsibilities and this means more work for clerks (who may not want to take on more hours), and the council will have to find extra money and try to get additional staff potentially if so. Also, councillors may not want additional responsibilities and could affect recruitment of councillors.
- District councils may struggle to recruit as so much uncertainty – will services potentially be affected/lost as a result?
- Is it likely that small pcs will need to merge (even if not forced to) to afford extra services etc. and to manage economies of scale?