



Exmouth Town Council –Newsletter

Newsletter 30

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Local Government Review – Devon

What is it all about

Here is a subject guaranteed to set the populace alight in ferment and turmoil. The review of Local Government Structures in the area. If you work in local government it will be of vital interest as it may mean whether or not you are going to keep your job. If you are a resident you might wonder why there is a need for Local Government at all which takes your hard earned money from your wallet.

No one likes paying taxes but public spaces and services are essential to all our lives and have to be paid for. This is either through taxes we pay to Central Government which then supports local authorities with grants or through local Council Tax or charges on services such as car parking and leisure.

Where we are now

The current system is based on Exmouth Town Council, East Devon District Council and Devon County Council in this area. Twenty Five Exmouth Town Councillors represent five wards in the Town, East Devon District Council has councillors from all over East Devon District with 15 representing Exmouth wards. Devon County Council has 3 Councillors from Exmouth Divisions amongst Councillors from all of Devon who meet at County Hall. That's quite a lot of local administration with three elected sovereign bodies which each have powers over the town. They provide a huge number of services from cradle to the grave but there is duplication of service provision within the system and it is difficult for people to understand which organisation is responsible for what.

Why a review is happening

Successive Governments have been seeking new ways of working in Local Government over a number of years and the recent approach has been to ask areas if they want to see Unitary (all purpose Councils set up in their areas). The thinking is that this will end the confusion over who does what and end some of the 'Buck Passing' which goes on between the existing bodies. For a while it looked as though Devon County Council and the eight districts within Devon would seek to keep the current system in place albeit enhanced to improve joint working. Exeter City Council broke ranks and sought Unitary

Status for itself to join the ranks of Torbay and Plymouth who obtained Unitary status in the last review process back in 1996.

The Secretary of State decided that the proposal by Exeter City would not be financially robust enough to run as a Unitary Council. As a result it invited the rest of Devon to look at solutions for the whole County. Oh dear oh dear!!! The result was a whole host of suggestions and the Boundary Committee was given the job to seek out and recommend one viable unitary solution for Devon. It decided that only one solution was robust enough financially for the area and that was a Unitary Council for Devon on its current boundaries – that is the draft recommendation it has now put out to consultation. The weakness of the case here though was because of the Geographical scale of the County - would it be able to work strongly enough at community level? Now that is important for the Government because it is trying to do more to empower local people and communities and renew their interest in local democracy. However it is also seeking to improve efficiencies in Local Government as driving down costs is important too but also ensuring that local government is strong enough to empower its area and has the capacity to obtain funds at National and European Level. So strategic enough to have the cash and the power to do its job but local enough to be responsive to local communities and respond to what they want. The whole thing is a delicate balancing exercise.

Community Boards Concept

One of the big questions being raised is the Devon County Council proposal for setting up Community Boards based around the 28 Market and Coastal Towns of Devon. As the biggest town in Devon other than Exeter that gives Exmouth an important position within the debate. At the moment the idea of the Community Boards is being developed and how they would work. Membership would likely include 12 to over 20 Unitary and Town and Parish Councillors in a voting capacity. Other representation would be included from other public authorities such as the Police and community groups. Attendance would vary according to the topics under discussion. These Boards would report direct to the County Unitary Executive which would be the decision making body or ‘Cabinet’ made up of Portfolio Holders. The Boards would not be service delivery bodies nor would they replace Town and Parish Councils but would be the sounding boards at local level for the County to ensure that each area developed the kinds of services it required based on its particular needs and wishes. This concept is innovative and potentially exciting but is also untried and unproven at this point in time.

The Exeter/Exmouth Complication

The complication does not end there though because the Boundary Committee added an option for two unitary authorities for Devon in addition to Torbay and Plymouth. One would be based on Exeter and surrounding parishes to the East and down the Exe to and including Exmouth. The other would be the rest of rural Devon. That meant that Exeter now sees a hope of getting Unitary Status and whilst it would not have chosen to include Exmouth, Woodbury and Lypstone in its boundaries is prepared to accept this. Exmouth now becomes important to the game being played out.

We now have until 26th September to submit views to the Boundary Committee and anyone can send views in. The District Council has given notice that it will mount a legal challenge to the process which it says is flawed because the Boundary Committee says it is not free to make any recommendation it wants other than one based on a Unitary Solution.

What Happens Next

The Boundary Committee consider representations received from 29th September to 31st December then will make a recommendation to the Secretary of State who will then make a decision to adopt, amend, or reject it.

Where does Exmouth Town Council fit in all of this?

Exmouth Town Council has set up a working party to consider all proposals and has already quizzed the Chief Executive and Leaders of Exeter and East Devon District Councils and Chief Executive of Devon County Council to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal. It is an opportunity for the Town Council to seek transfer of land and buildings to be managed locally including services which are important to the town such as street cleaning, gardens and car parks. Funding would need to devolved to the Town Council in order to increase its capacity to deliver. The Town Council would need to work with its surrounding parishes also to ensure that they do not loose out and that we can work together to deliver local services which are best provided locally. Other parishes might of course decide that they do not want to take on further responsibilities and will be within their rights to decide that.

A response to the Boundary Committee and the Secretary of State is currently being developed by the Town Council and it is intended to have a special Council Meeting on 22nd September probably at a bigger venue than the Council Chamber at the Town Hall. This will enable local people to come along and to influence the response which is submitted.

Your Right To Respond

If you wish to make your views known to the Boundary Committee you may send them to Review Manager (Devon Review), The Boundary Committee for England, Trevelyan House, Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2HW email to reviews@boundarycommittee.org.uk

Affects us All

So dry as dust subject or not – your life WILL be affected one way or another by these important decisions on the future of Local Government in the area. I hope this newsletter goes some way to explaining what is happening so that you are in a better position to make informed comment if you wish to.

For more information – contact the Town Clerk on 01395 276167, visit the Town Hall, contact your Local Councillor or visit www.exmouth.gov.uk

Any comments or views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Exmouth Town Council. The newsletter is edited by the Town Clerk.