

Executive Summary

This outline proposal is prepared under section 47 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 and asks the Secretary of State to make regulations under section 25 of that Act to add Plymouth to the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. Plymouth City Council would become a constituent member of the Authority alongside Devon County Council and Torbay Council. The proposal also asks the Secretary of State to make regulations to provide for there to be a mayor for the enlarged area under section 27 of the Act.

The proposal has been prepared jointly by Plymouth City Council and the Authority and reflects a shared commitment to strengthening devolution, improving strategic decision-making and accelerating the area's transition to a Mayoral Strategic Authority.

The existing Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority would continue as the same statutory body corporate, but its area, membership and governance would be modified by regulations so that it becomes a Mayoral Strategic Authority for Devon, Torbay and Plymouth.

The Authority has resolved to develop plans for pursuing mayoral status. Following advice from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government the preparing authorities will take steps towards the development of a single proposal to include Plymouth in the Authority's area and seek mayoral conversion.

Membership would create a single strategic authority covering Devon, Torbay and Plymouth, bringing together a population of approximately 1.26 million people and incorporating the South West Peninsula's largest city.

The proposal reflects the reality that the area's economy, transport networks, housing markets and labour markets operate across administrative boundaries. Residents, businesses and public services already interact across Devon, Torbay and Plymouth through shared travel-to-work areas, supply chains, educational links and infrastructure networks. Membership would enable strategic decisions and investment to be made across a geography that better reflects these relationships and supports more effective long-term planning.

Membership would deliver several important benefits:

- a single strategic authority covering Devon, Torbay and Plymouth, serving approximately 1.26 million residents;

- the ability to plan and invest across interconnected labour markets, travel-to-work areas and functional economic geographies;
- devolved powers and funding for transport, adult skills, housing, regeneration and investment being coordinated across the enlarged area for the first time;
- a simpler and more coherent basis for future strategic planning arrangements, including future Spatial Development Strategy governance;
- stronger engagement with Government, national agencies, investors and delivery partners;
- a stronger platform for attracting investment, supporting economic growth and delivering major infrastructure.

The proposal supports the area's ambition to secure the fullest benefits of devolution through a Mayoral Strategic Authority. The Government has made clear that mayoral authorities will be the primary vehicles for future devolution, fiscal powers and long-term investment. A combined Devon, Torbay and Plymouth geography would provide a stronger platform for securing enhanced powers, greater local influence, increased fiscal flexibility, longer-term funding certainty and access to future devolved responsibilities.

The enlarged Authority would be particularly well placed to support nationally significant growth opportunities, including defence investment at HMNB Devonport, marine industries, advanced manufacturing, environmental technologies, clean energy, culture and the visitor economy. It would also strengthen the area's ability to coordinate transport improvements, housing delivery, workforce development and infrastructure investment needed to support future growth.

For Plymouth, membership would provide direct participation in decisions concerning devolved powers, funding and strategic investment. For Devon and Torbay, it would bring the area's largest economic and population centre into the Authority and create a more representative strategic geography. For the area as a whole, it would establish a stronger, more influential and more integrated strategic institution capable of delivering economic, social and environmental benefits across Devon, Torbay and Plymouth.

Subject to the outcome of consultation, the consents required under sections 47(5A) and 47(5B) of the Act, acceptance of the proposal by the Secretary of State and approval of the regulations by both Houses of Parliament, Plymouth's membership of the Authority and the Authority's conversion to a mayoral strategic authority would take effect on a date to be set in the regulations.

The proposal responds to a period of significant change in England's devolution framework and reflects the shared view of the preparing authorities that a larger, more coherent strategic geography under mayoral governance is the most effective way to secure future powers, investment and opportunities for residents, businesses and communities across Devon, Torbay and Plymouth.

Plymouth's membership would strengthen the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority as the strategic institution for Devon, Torbay and Plymouth. It would allow existing devolved functions to operate across a larger and more representative geography, strengthen the area's voice with Government, and provide a more coherent foundation for strategic planning, transport, skills, housing, infrastructure and investment activity.

The proposal does not create a new organisation or transfer local government functions unnecessarily. Rather, it builds on an existing institution, extends established partnership arrangements and enables Devon, Torbay and Plymouth to work together more effectively on the opportunities and challenges they share.

The proposal reflects the authorities' shared ambition to secure the fullest possible benefits of devolution through progression to Mayoral Strategic Authority status at the earliest appropriate opportunity. Bringing Plymouth into the Authority would create a stronger and more coherent strategic geography, encompassing a population of approximately 1.26 million people, better aligned with functional economic, housing and transport markets and with the scale at which Government increasingly expects strategic authorities to operate. It would provide a stronger platform for securing enhanced devolved powers, greater fiscal autonomy, longer-term funding certainty and increased influence over the strategic decisions that shape the future prosperity of Devon, Torbay and Plymouth.

The preparing authorities therefore invite the Secretary of State to make regulations under section 25 and 27 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 adding Plymouth to the area of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and converting to a Mayoral Strategic Authority.

What kind of mayor this is

The word mayor is used for three different jobs. This proposal is about only one of them.

It is not about the Lord Mayor of Plymouth, the Lord Mayor of Exeter, or Civic Mayor of Torbay. These are ceremonial roles. Councillors choose one of their own members each year to chair Council meetings and to represent their councils. It carries no power over services, budgets or decisions and nothing in this proposal changes it.

It is not about a directly elected mayor of a council, who runs a council and is responsible for its services. Plymouth rejected that model at a referendum and it is no longer available to English councils.

This is about a mayor of a strategic authority. That mayor is elected by everyone living in the whole area. They do not run any council and have no responsibility for council services. What they hold is a set of powers and funding passed down from Government to be used across the wider area. They chair the Authority and sit alongside the leaders of the constituent councils.

Where the Authority sits now and what would change

Government has set out three levels of strategic authority. A Foundation Strategic Authority has a defined set of powers and funding but no mayor. A Mayoral Strategic Authority has a directly elected mayor and a wider set of powers, including several that only a mayor can exercise. An Established Mayoral Strategic Authority is a mayoral authority that has been designated under section 25A of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which brings further flexibility including an integrated funding settlement.

The Authority is currently a Foundation Strategic Authority. This proposal would make it a Mayoral Strategic Authority. Designation as an Established Mayoral Strategic Authority is a separate step that requires its own proposal to the Secretary of State and is not part of this proposal.

Powers and funding

The following sets out what the Authority holds now and what it would hold as a mayoral authority. Where figures are given for other areas, they are what comparable places have received. They are not a commitment to Devon, Torbay and Plymouth, and the funding available to any new mayoral authority is a matter for Government.

Transport and local infrastructure

The Authority is already the local transport authority. It is responsible for an area wide Local Transport Plan, Bus Service Improvement Plans and concessionary fares, and it can seek bus franchising powers. Rail powers were not devolved.

Should it become a mayoral authority, the mayor would be able to designate a key route network of strategically important roads, and to give directions to councils about how those roads are managed.

Designation requires a resolution of the Authority as well as a proposal from the mayor, and a mayor giving a direction has to meet the costs a council incurs in complying with it. The mayor would also have a statutory role in rail, including the ability to ask Government for rail devolution and for control of stations. Adopting the Local Transport Plan would require a majority of members that includes the mayor.

Skills and employment support

The Authority already has the Adult Education Budgets devolved to it from 2026 to 2027 and shapes provider allocations, outcomes and Skills Bootcamps. It contributes to Local Skills Improvement Plans.

As a mayoral authority it would hold a single adult skills budget that is not ring fenced, and would jointly own Local Skills Improvement Plans, including designating the Employer Representative Body and agreeing sector priorities. It would have a stronger role in shaping employment support beyond Jobcentre Plus.

Housing and strategic planning

The Authority can already assemble land and use compulsory purchase powers with local consent and works with Homes England on housing delivery.

As a mayoral authority it would be responsible for a Spatial Development Strategy for the whole area, prepared and adopted by the mayor on behalf of the Authority, with adoption requiring a majority of members that includes the mayor.

The mayor would gain development management powers over applications of strategic importance, the ability to set up Mayoral Development Corporations and to make development orders, and the ability to charge a levy on new development to pay for infrastructure. Government is consulting between 24 August and 5 October 2026 on how the development management powers should work, including the thresholds at which they apply.

Councils would continue to be the local planning authority. Every application would still be made to and considered by the local council in the first instance.

Economic development and regeneration

The Authority already has capital funding for housing, net zero and green skills, and works with Government on the area's economic priorities.

As a mayoral authority it would have access to a long term investment fund and a stronger role in innovation, including working with UK Research and Innovation and Innovate UK on a long term local innovation strategy.

The environment and climate change, health, wellbeing and public service reform, public safety, culture, and rural and coastal communities.

These are areas of competence for strategic authorities under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026. Mayoral status brings a stronger voice and, in several of them, a formal role as a consultee on national strategy. Responsibility for the services themselves stays with councils and with the existing public bodies.

Council tax

A mayor of a strategic authority can add a charge to council tax bills across the whole area. No decision has been taken on that and it would be a matter for the mayor once elected.

How decisions would be taken

Some functions become exercisable only by the mayor, acting on behalf of the Authority. The members and officers of the Authority may assist the mayor in exercising

them. Others remain functions of the Authority but need the mayor's agreement, and on some matters the mayor votes as one member among others.

The mayor has a casting vote where a vote is tied on the matters where their agreement is required. There would be a deputy mayor, appointed from among the Authority's members, who can act in the mayor's place.

The Authority's constitution already gives each constituent council significant protection. Approval of the budget, approval of and significant amendment to the constitution, appointment of the chief executive, monitoring officer and section 73 officer, and approval of the policy framework all require the agreement of the lead members.

The preparing authorities intend that this requirement extends to all three lead members from the membership date, so that no constituent council can be bound on these matters against its will. The constitution also requires the consent of the lead member of the constituent council in whose area a decision will apply before the Authority may compulsorily purchase land or buildings, before the Homes England compulsory purchase power is used, and before any decision that could lead to a financial liability falling directly on that council.

The preparing authorities intend that these protections are carried into the mayoral constitution so far as the law allows. A full review of the constitution would be needed on conversion and would be taken forward jointly.

The Authority has an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and an Audit and Governance Committee, with membership drawn from the constituent councils and the Devon district councils and an independent person on each. Both would continue and would scrutinise the mayor as well as the Authority.

The election

The mayor would be elected by everyone living in Devon, Torbay and Plymouth, an electorate serving a population of around 1.26 million people and would serve a four year term.

The Act allows a mayoral authority to exist and to prepare for the period between conversion and the first mayor taking office, so the two do not have to happen on the same day.

What does not change

This proposal does not merge, abolish or reorganise any council. It does not change any council boundary. It does not affect the Lord Mayoralty (for Plymouth or Exeter) or the city's status. Councils remain responsible for the services people use and remain accountable for them to their own residents.

Please take part in our survey!

The demographic questions at the end of the survey are optional. Any information you provide will be anonymised and used only for monitoring and reporting purposes, and individuals will not be identifiable in any published results.

Are you responding as a resident, a business, an organisation, an elected member or in another capacity?

This question is required.

Select one option

A Resident

A Business

An Organisation

An Elected Member



Add something else

Please provide the first part of your postcode (for example PL1)

This question is required.

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, please tell us the name of the organisation

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Plymouth City Council should join the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority 'the Authority'?

Select one option

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

What benefits do you think can be achieved through Plymouth City Council joining the Authority?

Do you have any concerns about Plymouth joining the Authority, and what could be done to address them?

The enlarged Authority would take decisions across Devon, Plymouth and Torbay on transport, skills and adult education, housing and strategic planning, economic development, the environment, health and wellbeing, public safety, culture and rural and coastal communities (please see the section on powers of competence). Which of these, if any, do you think would be better decided by a Mayor across the wider area rather than by each council on its own?

Select one or more options

Transport	Skills and adult education	Housing and strategic planning	
Economic development	The environment	Health and wellbeing	Public safety
Culture	Rural and coastal communities	None of these	Don't know

What benefits do you think can be achieved through the Authority becoming a Mayoral Strategic Authority?

Do you have any concerns about the Authority becoming a Mayoral Strategic Authority and what could be done to address them?

What should the priorities of the enlarged and Mayoral Strategic Authority be?

The consultation document outlines potential governance and decision-making considerations associated with an expanded and converted Mayoral Strategic Authority. What is your view of these considerations?

Click "Next" to submit your response.

Next