

# CITY COUNCIL 17 MARCH 2025

## BRIEFING PAPER: PLYMOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION INTERIM PLAN MARCH 2025



### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 On 16 December 2024, the Government published the English Devolution White Paper (Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth) setting out their plans for devolution and local government reorganisation, with the aim of shifting power away from Whitehall and simplifying local government structures. Devolution and local government reorganisation are separate but very much related processes to fundamentally transform local government for the future. The Government have stated very clearly that local government reorganisation will be based on the principle of unitarisation, with the current two-tier system abolished. The government see such an approach as central to its future growth ambitions to achieve national economic renewal.
- 1.2 On 09 January 2025, in response to a report on the English Devolution White Paper the City Council (Minute 51 refers) resolved the following:
1. The Government has clearly stated that large Strategic Authorities led by directly elected mayors represent their preferred path for devolution, viewing this model as the most effective way to transfer power and resources from Westminster to local regions. In response to this clear policy direction, Plymouth City Council strongly advocates for the establishment of a South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority. This proposed authority would encompass the combined geography of Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay.
  2. The necessity to expand the Council's administrative boundaries to achieve the scale required for future sustainability. This must be carefully balanced with preserving both Plymouth's distinctive identity and the identities of neighbouring communities. Work to develop appropriate options and a business case for this will now commence.
- 1.3 On 05 February 2025 the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon OBE MP wrote to all the leaders of two-tier and some neighbouring unitary councils stating that the government has a clear vision for simpler, more sustainable local government structures, alongside plans for the transfer of power out of Westminster through devolution. This letter also set out a formal legal invitation under powers set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to submit proposals for a single tier of local government and in an attached schedule identifies the Secretary of State's guidance and criteria for unitary government. The letter sets out a timetable for the submission of an interim plan by 21 March 2025 and final proposals by 28 November 2025. Government has made clear that all two-tier areas will have to comply with the requirements of the White Paper. It has stated that it would prefer agreement from authorities in developing a single proposal, but if agreement cannot be reached, the Government will accept competing proposals and will decide on the best way forward to ensure its overall aims for better and more efficient service delivery are achieved.

## 2.0 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

- 2.1 The White Paper announces that the Government will facilitate a programme of reorganisation for two-tier local government areas which will be abolished and replaced with an England-wide network of unitary councils sitting under new Strategic Authorities. Government anticipates that delivery will be phased, taking account of where local government can unlock devolution and where areas want to proceed at pace.
- 2.2 At the Strategic Authority level, the government has highlighted 7 principles related to scale, there being “no devolution islands”, effective delivery of key functions, the need for sensible economic geographies, contiguous boundaries with new constituent unitary authorities, promotion of alignment with other public body boundaries, and local identity. In relation to local government reorganisation the government’s expectations are:
- All two-tier areas and smaller or failing unitary councils are to develop proposals for reorganisation.
  - All councils in an area should collaborate on developing unitary proposals in the best interests of a whole area, rather than producing competing proposals.
  - New councils should be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. For most areas the Government believes this will mean creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more. There may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area, agreed on a case-by-case basis.
  - They will prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens and communities above all other issues.
  - These reforms will be sequenced alongside devolution ambitions for each area.
  - New councils will be expected to take a proactive and innovative approach to neighbourhood involvement and community governance so that citizens are empowered.
  - Councils should work with government to bring about changes as swiftly as possible.
  - They will consider which governance models available for local authorities’ best support future decision-making.
- 2.3 New unitary councils are to be delivered in April 2027 and 2028, with shadow elections taking place earlier. The White Paper sets out that local government re-organisation should not delay devolution and devolution plans should be complementary.
- 2.4 The White Paper therefore creates an opportunity to look at the geographical footprint of existing council areas, to ensure that local councils fit effectively within the new strategic tier of local government. The Plymouth Local Government Reorganisation Interim Plan has been developed to ensure that it aligns with a Mayoral Strategic Authority comprising Devon, Torbay, and Plymouth and its preferred South West Peninsula Mayoral Strategic Authority also including Cornwall endorsed in the report to the City Council on 09 January 2025 (Minute 51 refers).

- 2.5 The letter received from the Minister of State on 05 February 2025, referencing powers in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, is predicated on new unitary councils combining with whole districts or counties. For the reasons set out in Section 3 this is not an approach that will work well for Plymouth.

### **3.0 THE OPTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION FOR PLYMOUTH**

#### **Vision and Principles**

- 3.1 Plymouth City Council warmly welcomes the Government's approach to both the devolving of powers from Westminster and the recognition that in order to achieve its wider missions for government, especially sustainable growth and much-needed new homes, local government needs streamlining and fundamentally changed to a model based on unitary councils. Moreover, as research over decades has shown, by the Centre for Cities and others, the top 20-30 major English cities are the engine room for growth for "UK PLC". It is therefore vital that these cities need the ability to drive job creation and accelerate housing delivery on a more sub-regional footprint, moving away from historically constrained boundaries.
- 3.2 The City Council welcomes and generally supports the 6 criteria to be met for unitary government set out in the Minister of State's letter of 05 February 2025:
1. A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
  2. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.
  3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
  4. Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.
  5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
  6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.
- 3.3 Plymouth City Council has a vision to see a pattern of local government in Devon which:
- Delivers genuine high-quality and effective strategic leadership of place, recognising Plymouth's role as a regional centre and economic hub for the south of the region.
  - Delivers accessible, efficient, effective, and responsive services to people that seeks to tackle inequalities and deprivation.
  - Delivers a system of local governance that acknowledges the relationship and interdependencies between city and surrounding settlements and ensures that this governance still remains genuinely local to where people live.

- Delivers high quality services that addresses the specific needs of individual neighbourhoods and parishes, empowering local people and their representatives to inform the design and delivery of services and the setting of policies and priorities.

3.4 In developing its own approach to local government reorganisation it is proposed that any options should be considered against the following principles:

1. Any boundary change will be appropriate for a new Plymouth unitary authority to be financially viable and of a population size that can deliver sustainable high-quality services to residents.
2. Any boundary change will retain the character and identity of the existing neighbourhoods in Plymouth and the parishes of any extended area.
3. Any boundary change will respect existing unitary county boundaries.
4. Any boundary change will minimise organisational impacts on the Dartmoor National Park Authority.
5. Any boundary change will be based on existing parish boundaries.
6. Any boundary change will have regard to the requirements for future sustainable growth and reflect the opportunities that arise from Plymouth's unique strategic role in the south west.

### **Main Options**

3.5 There are of course a multitude of options that could be taken forward for Plymouth and the surrounding area. For example, a boundary change that was based on the travel to work area would encompass not only a wide area of Devon but also south east Cornwall. Options of this nature have not been developed in detail because of the unique heritage and national minority status of Cornwall.

3.6 In essence therefore there are 4 options that have been considered in detail:

- Option 1: An extended city boundary based on a Plymouth Growth Area.
- Option 2: An extended city boundary based on the Local Care Partnership Western NHS Locality.
- Option 3: An extended city boundary based on the Plymouth Housing Market Area.
- Option 4: Do nothing.

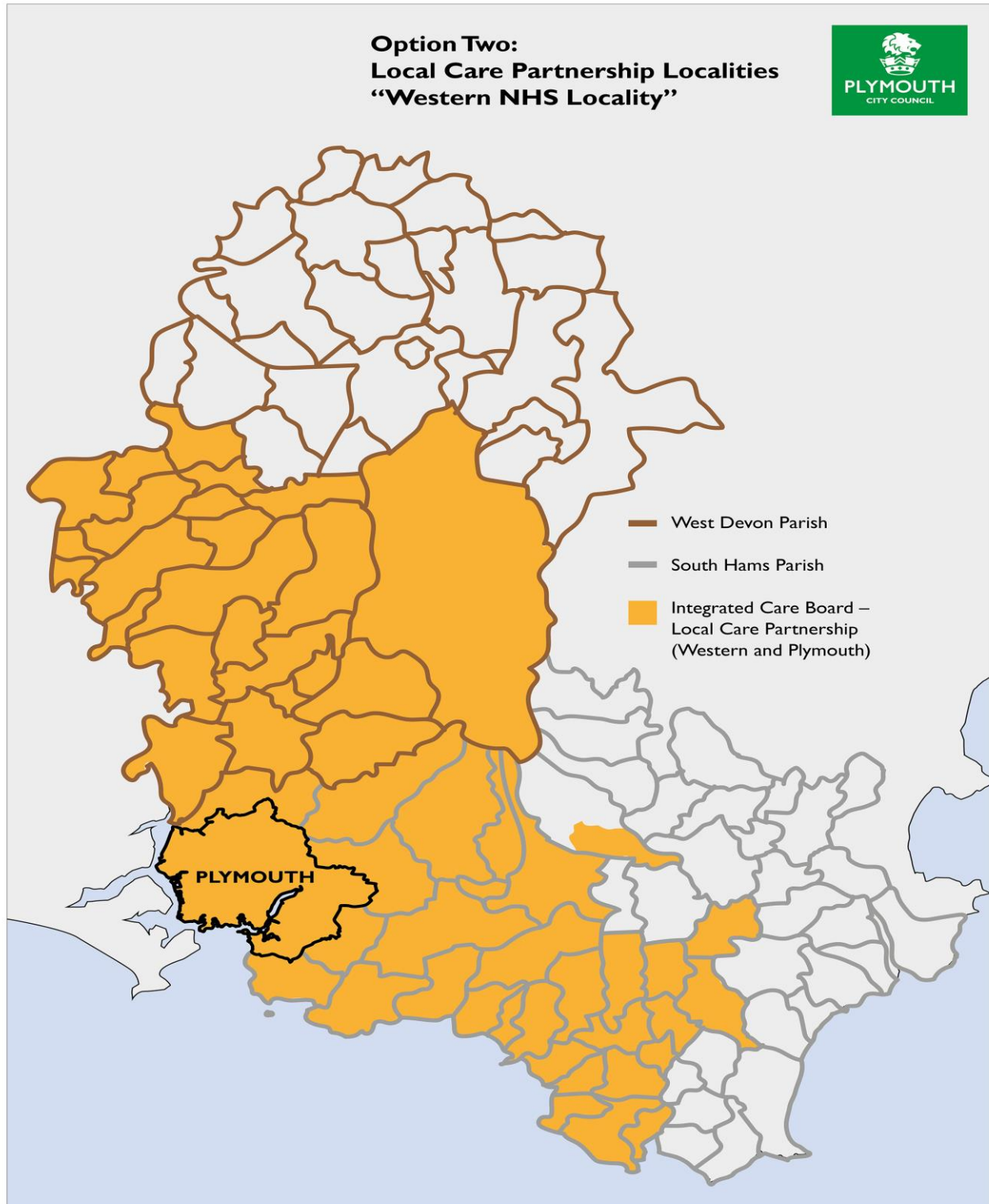
### Option 1: An extended city boundary based on a Plymouth Growth Area.

- 3.7 This option would be based on the most appropriate whole parishes that currently border the city and which contain settlements that are functionally linked to it in terms of immediate travel to work, housing market and shopping catchment areas. This option would encompass 13 parishes (Bickleigh, Shaugh Prior, Sparkwell, Brixton, Wembury, Cornwood, Harford, Ugborough, Ivybridge, Ermington, Yealmpton, Holberton and Newton and Noss. The total population of this extended area including Plymouth would be 300,733. This extended area includes 12,000 households and 29,000 people.



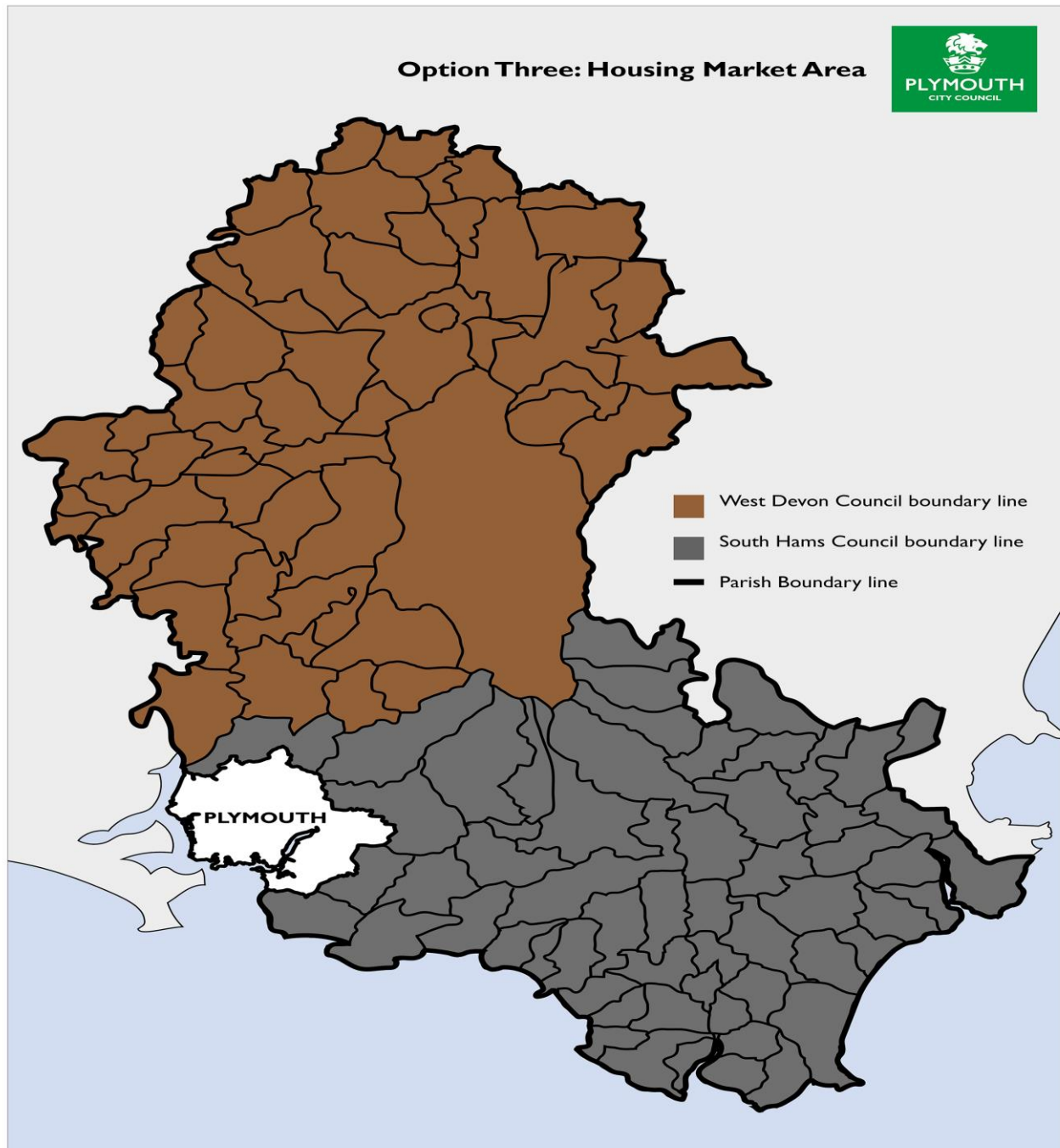
## Option 2: An extended city boundary based on the Local Care Partnership Western NHS Locality

- 3.8 This option would align to the provision of health care services by the Local Care Partnership and reflects access to care services in the Western NHS Locality. This area would cover 25 parishes in West Devon Borough Council (out of a total of 46 town and parish councils/meetings) and 29 parishes in South Hams District Council (out of a total of 61 town and parish councils/meetings). The population of this area would be 335,691.



**Option 3: An extended city boundary based on the Plymouth Housing Market Area.**

- 3.9 This option is based upon that part of the Housing Market Area that was identified through the preparation of the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan, adopted in March 2019. This option would cover all the parishes in both South Hams District Council area and all the parishes in West Devon Borough Council area. The population of this area would be 412,790.



**Option 4: Do nothing.**

3.10 The City Council could choose to make no representations to the formal legal invitation to present proposals for local government reorganisation or make representations to the effect that it does not wish to see any changes to its current boundaries, maintaining the current size and configuration. This would mean no changes to the boundary of the city and a population of 267,063.

**4.0 ASSESSMENT OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION FOR PLYMOUTH**

4.1 The 4 main options have been assessed against both the six criteria for unitary government set out in the letter from the Minister of State on 05 February 2025 and the six principles identified by the City Council in relation to local government reorganisation.

Criteria	Government Criteria						Plymouth City Council Criteria					
	Single Tier	Right Size	Prioritise Services	Working Together	Support Devolution	Community Engagement	Appropriate Boundary	Character and Identity	County Unitary Boundary	National Park	Whole Parish Boundaries	Sustainable Growth
1	Green	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
2	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Green	Red	Green	Yellow
3	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Yellow
4	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red

Key:

Options

- Option 1: An extended city boundary based on a Plymouth Growth Area.
- Option 2: An extended city boundary based on the Local Care Partnership Western NHS Locality.
- Option 3: An extended city boundary based on the Plymouth Housing Market Area.
- Option 4: Do nothing.

Assessment

Green	High degree of compliance with the criteria.
Yellow	Some degree of compliance with the criteria.
Red	Fails to comply with the criteria.

4.2 In conclusion, Option 1 (the Plymouth Growth Area) demonstrates the best fit with the principles for local government reorganisation set out in the report and has also been assessed as best meeting four of the criteria for unitary government set out in the schedule to the letter from the Minister of State on 05 February 2025: and is capable of meeting the other two. This is the option that it is recommended to form the basis of the Plymouth Local Government Reorganisation Interim Plan to be submitted to the government by 21 March 2025.

4.3 Option 2 (the Local Care Partnership NHS Western Locality Area) whilst aligning to the provision of health care services by the Local Care Partnership would be in conflict what is known in terms of delivering local government reorganisation in the rest of Devon. It has the potential to meet the Government’s criteria but conflicts with two of the City Council’s local government reorganisation principles. This option is therefore not recommended as it does



not meet the City Council's principles and further work would be needed to demonstrate compliance with the national criteria for local government reorganisation.

- 4.4 Option 3 (the Housing Market Area) is based upon what was identified through the preparation of the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan, adopted in March 2019, although in reality the housing market area also extends into south east Cornwall. This option would create an unwieldy area for service delivery covering an excessively large geographic area and would be in conflict with what is known in terms of delivering local government reorganisation in the rest of Devon. This option has been assessed as potentially meeting the national criteria for local government reorganisation but conflicts with three of the City Council's criteria for unitary government. This option is therefore not recommended on that basis.
- 4.5 In relation to Option 4, although it is possible for the City Council to not respond to the formal legal invitation to present proposals for local government reorganisation or make representations to the effect that it does not wish to see any changes to its current boundaries, maintaining the current size and configuration of Plymouth City Council is not a feasible option given the Government's clear direction for comprehensive reorganisation of local governance structures. The Government has made it unequivocally clear that local government reorganisation will proceed, with the specific aim of establishing single unitary authorities throughout England of an appropriate size to then align with the new strategic authorities. The Government has told councils that unitary authorities need to be of a viable size to be financially sustainable in the long run, whilst also considering issues of identity, character, and public service reform. Councils need to be sustainable and have the scope to grow and thrive. Therefore, Plymouth recognises the necessity to expand its administrative boundaries to achieve the scale required for future financial sustainability. It also recognises that further consideration needs to be given to governance structures. On that basis this option is not a sensible or realistic option to pursue as it consigns the city to a period of ultimate decline with ever dwindling resources.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 The Government White Paper clearly states that their goal is "universal coverage in England of Strategic Authorities" and "devolution by default" is the direction of travel. It is not a question of 'if' devolution will happen, rather 'when it will happen.' The same applies to local government reorganisation.
- 5.2 Plymouth is an ambitious city and welcomes the opportunities which arise from both the government's devolution and local government reorganisation approach. Plymouth can and should play a unique role as an expanded city driving growth and delivering better public services. As a city and as a council Plymouth has a track record of innovation, collaboration and focus on delivery through a wide variety of programmes and projects it has delivered over the years. In order to fulfil its long-term potential and to enable the government to meet its growth objectives it now needs to operate on a more sub-regional footprint.
- 5.3 It is considered that the preferred option set out in Appendix I is the option that is both broadly compliant with the White Paper, the Government's criteria for local government reorganisation set out in the Minister of State's letter of 05 February 2025 and the City Council's own principles for reorganisation. It is also considered to be the option that is in the best interests of both residents and businesses within the city and the proposed expanded area.

- 5.4 It is therefore recommended that the City Council considers the recommendations put forward to progress its proposals for local government reorganisation for onward approval by Cabinet.