

The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

24 July 2026

Dear Secretary of State,

Local Government Reorganisation in Devon

I am writing as Leader of South Hams District Council following the Government's announcement on 16 July 2026 that it intends to proceed with the four-unitary model for Local Government Reorganisation in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay.

I respectfully request that this decision is reconsidered before secondary legislation is taken forward, and that an urgent meeting is arranged with Devon's political leaders to discuss the implications for our residents, businesses and communities.

South Hams District Council recognises the Government's plans to simplify local government, strengthen public services and indeed supports your ambitions for devolution and the creation of mayoral strategic authorities over a wider geography. However, the decision to expand the boundaries of Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay to form new unitaries, while placing the remainder of the county into a vast Devon Council, has caused deep disappointment and serious concern across our rural towns, villages and coastal communities.

Community Identity

This plan will see the South Hams split into three, with communities in the west taken into Greater Plymouth, communities in the east incorporated into Torbay and South Devon, and the remainder placed within the Devon Council. The scale of the proposed boundary changes is significant. Seen from Whitehall, the extension of Plymouth into the thirteen parishes of South Hams will seem a minor adjustment but for the residents and businesses affected and indeed, for the district as a whole, this represents a substantial redrawing of South Hams' geography, affecting communities with long-standing links to the district and to each other.

The same is true in the east, where the transfer of South Hams communities into Torbay and South Devon will extend well beyond a simple tidying of boundaries. The communities at the mouth of the River Dart, which have been inextricably linked for centuries, with common concerns around marine and visitor economy, are now to be split into separate administrative areas.

What is abundantly clear is that the government's decision is very much in the interests of the cities at the expense of the remaining rural parts of the county and is entirely at odds with the stated aim of ensuring that local government meets the needs of all of Devon.

The views of consultees

It is clear that the views of statutory consultees have been disregarded by the government in reaching its decision, given 51% supported the Reimagining Devon proposal, with only 18% supporting the proposal put forward by Plymouth and Exeter Councils. The lack of support for the Plymouth and Exeter proposal is further evidenced by it being ranked lowest of all options by all respondents, with only 20% in favour and more than three times the amount (69%) against.

Our concern is reinforced by the consultation analysis, which shows a clear lack of local support for the proposed boundary changes. Only 19% believe that there is a strong financial and public service case for the changes, demonstrating that the Government's chosen model does not command confidence on the very grounds on which reorganisation is expected to be justified.

The analysis further highlights significant concerns about the potential loss of community identity and local representation, the risk that rural areas would be overshadowed within urban-focused structures, and the practical challenges of travel distances, accessibility and service delivery across large or dispersed areas. These are not minor points of disagreement; they go directly to the heart of the matter and to the core question of whether the proposed model can deliver accountable, sustainable and responsive local government for Devon's communities.

The consultation evidence also underlines that support for the proposal is, at best, deeply contested. It cannot credibly be claimed that this proposal is supported by Devon's councils, residents or partners when the analysis records such substantial concern about its financial case, public service impact and consequences for local identity. The Government should not proceed as though there is a settled local mandate for a model that remains so clearly opposed by many of those who will have to live with its consequences.

A sustainable model for local government

Without the population base, economic scale and revenue-generating capacity that a substantial urban centre can provide, there is a serious risk that the proposed geography will not be financially viable in the long term. A model that weakens local focus would place additional pressure on taxpayers, limit investment in local services and infrastructure, and make it harder to sustain the responsive, place-based support that South Hams communities rely on.

That risk matters because residents and taxpayers will ultimately bear the consequences through higher unit costs of service delivery, further pressure on council tax, reduced investment in local services and infrastructure, and a weakened ability to sustain the accessible, responsive and community-focused services that rural and coastal communities rely on.

South Hams District Council believes there were stronger and more coherent alternatives available. The Reimagining Devon proposal, developed through significant local effort and supported by a broad understanding of Devon's communities, offered a more balanced model that better respected existing boundaries, protected community identity, reduced disruption and provided a clearer route to stable implementation. It was designed to meet the Government's own criteria while recognising the distinctive needs of Devon's rural, coastal and urban communities. The selected proposal would require a redirection of already stretched capacity and resources into implementing one of the most complex and high-risk models of local government of all the proposals submitted.

This is a decision of enormous consequence for Devon. It will shape local services, democratic accountability and community confidence for a generation. It is therefore vital that the concerns now being expressed are heard at the highest level and that the final implementation arrangements are not rushed through without proper scrutiny, assurance and dialogue.

We would welcome the opportunity to set out South Hams District Council's position constructively, share evidence from our area, and work with Ministers, officials and local MPs to ensure that any future model is financially sustainable, democratically accountable and capable of delivering high-quality services for our residents.

Given the significance of the decision, I would be grateful if your office could arrange a meeting at the earliest opportunity. We would be pleased to meet in Westminster, online, or in South Hams should Ministers wish to hear directly from local representatives and communities.

South Hams District Council stands ready to work constructively with Government and partners across Devon. However, we must also be clear that the current decision is untenable. It does not offer the best future for our residents, our communities or our public services, and it should be reconsidered before irreversible steps are taken.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed within a thin circular outline. The signature appears to be 'Dan Thomas'.

Cllr Dan Thomas
Leader, South Hams District Council

Copied to: Rebecca Smith MP, Caroline Voaden MP