

HONITON TOWN COUNCIL

PLANNING FOR DEVON UNITARY COUNCILS

JULY 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the Government's intention for local government re-organisation, this paper describes Honiton Town Council's (HTC) approach, priorities and opportunities for working differently.

HTC welcomes the opportunities that re-organisation of local government in Devon can achieve. The Town Council is focused on local distinctiveness and the needs of Honiton's residents, businesses and visitors, making Honiton an attractive place and enabling local priority setting and control of services and assets that are required to achieve those priorities. The Town Council will take responsibility, communicate, be visible amongst the community and work with and influence other agencies.



HTC can work with outgoing councils and incoming unitary authorities to remodel how local distinctiveness is achieved, enabling community engagement and empowerment and upper tier councils to connect and

communicate with local councils. The Town Council is central to working with other surrounding local Parish councils and the unitary authority providing a conduit.

The Town Council has identified its priorities for the Place as the economy, tourism, business and the environment. The Town Council is informed by local views; Honiton will reflect its local identity as an attractive place (Gateway to the South West), celebrating the history of the Town and its industries, providing

quality business spaces for well paid employment, supporting businesses, promoting quality of the built environment and improving quality of public open spaces, play areas and conservation sites. The Town Council will provide efficient public services at lowest cost to the taxpayer, high quality services and engage volunteers.

To achieve those outcomes, the Town Council will support devolution, controlling several Place making services and to work together with and influence other statutory agencies, voluntary and community sectors.

The Town Council is realistic about securing sustainable funding, impact on Precept and implications for its size, governance and accountability.

Honiton Town Council wants to be:

- recognised as an important contributor when forming unitary councils, as the level of local Government that is closest to the community. To be involved and informed, shown respect and (forming unitary councils and existing councils) to be responsive;
- used as a tool for upper tier authorities to engage and communicate with local communities. For relationship to have devoted resources and a meaningful relationship not based on superficially demonstrating involvement. For local councils to be able to influence, scrutinise and understand unitary authorities and other public sector organisations (eg health, education, Police, Fire);
- a deliverer of important local discretionary services. As the hub for provision of services to people living in other surrounding local council areas. For upper tier authorities to be able to demonstrate that important local discretionary services are being provided to good quality at lowest cost and are financially sustainable, by the local council.



INTRODUCTION

The Town Council has considered the likely impact of the introduction of unitary authorities in Devon, which will result in, amongst a range of changes in Devon's local government, the demise of East Devon District Council (EDDC) and Devon County Council (DCC). As a consequence, all the functions currently undertaken by those councils will need to be reallocated. This is likely to present opportunities in Honiton and for Honiton Town Council (HTC) to provide improved public services, at least cost and more "in touch" with Honiton's community. HTC may have the opportunity to take responsibility for certain services, providing opportunities as well as obligations. However, those opportunities can only be realised if sustainable-funding is provided to allow services to be run efficiently and effectively.



In putting together this paper the Council has reviewed two papers that have been produced previously to create a blueprint for the future of Honiton, 'Vision of Honiton 2030' (undated but believed to be prior to 2007) and the Council's draft Community Strategy 2022-23 are still pertinent today and prompted conceptions which could be adopted to make Honiton a more pleasant town in which to live. Some of these ideas have already been developed into HTC Priority Projects.

Transition to a Unitary Authority

It is likely that existing Councils and the proposed Unitary Authorities will consider what services Unitary Authorities will undertake and what will be devolved to local councils; those services (provided by unitary councils) are likely to be statutory requirements; Unitary councils are likely to be focused on Children

and Adult services, together with Place based services. It is possible that some additional restructuring could occur; the Government's White Paper highlights the importance of the relationship between unitary authorities and local councils for example to retain local distinctiveness, not least as District Councils will be removed.

This would likely mean that HTC will have a different, closer relationship with adjacent local Parish Councils, possibly in the form of a forum through which mutual issues reflecting local distinctiveness are discussed and local councils can then collectively address the Unitary Authority through a united voice.

The Town Council will work closely with the surrounding local parish councils, thereby providing an opportunity to plan for the wider area and to communicate with the Unitary Authority.



Re-organisation will enable devolved responsibilities and autonomy, which provides clear responsibility, enhances local distinctiveness, community engagement, local control all focused on improvements to services, facilities and the environment.

Better communication and consultation must be implemented, with decisions reflective of the locality.

Re-organisation provides the ability to set key priorities at a local for the town and wider area (eg influencing the Local Plan to match community infrastructure with developments).

This summary paper describes the various elements of life in Honiton and how the Town Council believes it could be improved by local government re-organisation.

PRIORITIES

The Town Council has determined its priorities as the economy: business & employment, tourism and the environment.

Economy: Business and Employment

Most of Honiton's businesses are small, so few major national companies bringing their sizeable employment. Main businesses are based at Heath Park



which is well occupied. Honiton needs an area set aside in the Local Plan for higher skilled, technology based, well paid, major businesses to be established (perhaps west of Heath Park) in Gittisham parish. Visibility of existing businesses can be improved eg with a directory and trade fairs. Good well paid jobs will help to retain young people. The town centre must be kept

vibrant and advice on business rents may help shops negotiate with landlords. A broad range of shops are needed that avoids the need for travel. The environment of the town centre could be improved with some pedestrianisation to create a safe place and café culture. Enabling local shops to take advantage of modern on-line shopping trends may ensure their viability. The Council should support the accessibility of Banking services in the town centre.

Honiton is blessed with a variety of restaurants, cafes and bars, both within and outside the town, which can be built on, supporting Honiton's busy, friendly and entertaining town centre. Like the shops in the town centre, they can only survive if they have a regular clientele and avoid the need to travel out of town. The Council will work with the business community to enable it to thrive and improve, together with additional outlets, offering more options, range of goods and choices.

Tourism

As Honiton is the "Gateway to the South West", the Town Council wants to build on the work done by the Museum and create an accessible place/s where tourist visitors to Honiton can obtain information about the area, including local beauty spots, accommodation, What's On, maps, walks, footpaths and cycling routes.

Honiton benefits from a busy town centre as a place for people to shop, meet and do business. There are a significant number of independent retailers and good quality cafeterias and coffee shops. Honiton will need much better signage, especially for car parks, the coach park and dropping off points (Honiton is a Coach Friendly destination), tourist information centre/s and local attractions.

Similarly, Honiton has a number of historic sites and events which are not obvious to the casual visitor, so the Council should compile an information trail of historic venues and publicise services, facilities including local clubs and societies.

The quality of Honiton's historic built environment, Conservation area and town centre must be protected. The Council's objective is to have fewer empty shops, so the Council will encourage landlords and tenants to bring their properties up to a decent standard making Honiton a worthwhile town to use as a stopping-off point and an attraction.



The Council might also consider what other improvements could be made to the town, enabling it to attract more visitors: a 'town square' could provide a focal point, where various entertainment events could be organised and it could be used to provide a variety of different entertainments.

Honiton already has a plethora of independent shops and more could be made

of the attractions that already exist, such as the carnival, Charter Day, Hot Pennies, Gate2Plate, Honiton Hill Rally, the Beehive and Thelma Hulbert Gallery. The Council could promote a festival and add enhanced themed markets, additional green spaces within the town, street entertainment and a regular festival. In essence the town needs to be a vibrant hub of activity that people want to visit.

In order to support tourism, there are a number of hotels and many excellent B&Bs in the area. It would be helpful if there was a high profile hotel locally, in addition to the Premier Inn, but in order to attract a major company there needs to be a demand for its services, which an improved tourist offering might achieve.

Environment and Open Spaces

Work needs to be done to make Honiton's existing public spaces (including The Glen, Millenium Green, Honiton Bottom and riverside walks) more accessible and pleasant to use, with improved maintenance and enhancements. The Council undertakes works to protect the environment.

It may also be possible to develop new open spaces which people can use for a variety of pursuits, especially around the town centre. This vision might include the development of a multi-storey car park, possibly managed by a private company, at Lace Walk, with the remainder of the current car park being converted into parkland.



The Council will engage volunteers and a team to ensure that our highway, verges, roundabouts, town centre and open spaces are properly maintained, weed and litter free. This will result in a more pleasant living space and environment and will encourage visitors, demonstrating that Honiton is cared for and a place in which local people take responsibility and pride.

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

The Town Council will work with, scrutinise, understand and influence partner agencies and public service providers responsible for leisure & recreation, community services, education, planning and housing.

Leisure and Recreation

Honiton is served by a good number of entertainment venues including pubs, Conservative Club and the Beehive Community Centre which caters for events, cinema, shows, classes, community groups, businesses, council services and provides a café.



There is a complete range of participatory sports (rugby, football, cricket, hockey, bowls, tennis, netball, pétanque, running and golf, as well as indoor sports such as gymnastics, martial arts, boxing and squash).

However, there is a woeful lack of local available outside pitches (East Devon Playing Pitches Strategy and Honiton Sports Pitch Strategy) and whilst this lack of capacity, poor accessibility and lack of facilities is being addressed, the need for improvement and new facilities is urgent and wide-ranging.

Honiton benefits from its leisure centre, which must be affordable and provide for children's leisure and entertainment.

Facilities for young people are provided by sports clubs, cadets, theatre, youth club (CUB building), The Den youth café, skate park and several play areas. The Council plans to start a Youth Council and more and a broader offering of youth services are required.

Community Services and Infrastructure

Local statutory agencies must work together to stop and reverse the general

decline of Honiton's town centre.

Honiton has one GP surgery with few outreach services and is considered overstretched so poor accessibility to health services, but is supported by Honiton Hospital, which must continue.

Sufficient pharmacies must be provided in town, although may be at threat. The Council wants Honiton's library to remain open, thriving and well-run. It is welcomed that Honiton's Police station has recently re-opened and national initiatives should bring more and visible Policing. Continued local engagement is needed with the OPCC and Police about resources and antisocial behaviour. Elderly care and provision for the sick and disabled appears well catered for in town but loneliness and isolation must reduce and services made accessible.

It is important that local transport services are retained eg as provided by TRIP as a critical lifeline for the elderly and disabled. The town is adequately served with train, road and bus services (and bus routes may be reconfigured to reduce journey times.)



may require places in future.

Education

Primary/junior education seems adequate with unfortunately sixth form

education out of town. Provision of Adult Education needs to be improved.

Planning and Housing

It is critical that the Town Council continues to be able to contribute to strategic planning and development, as well as having input into individual planning decisions. Community infrastructure must not be allowed to fail to be delivered, or implemented too late or insufficiently.

The Council is concerned at recent reports about how planning under a Unitary Authority would be undertaken, with fewer decisions being made through Planning Committees and many taken by remote Planning Officers. This may lose critical local knowledge and democratic representation in decision making.

There is clearly a need for more reasonably priced housing, as replicated across the country, and if councils were able to address this issue, we could slow the leakage of talent that leaves the town due to lack of affordable accommodation.

Valuable local open spaces must be safeguarded and more provided alongside development

Events

Honiton benefits from a number of annual events (Charter Day, Gate to Plate, Hot Pennies and Honiton Show), which celebrate the town's history and bring the community together. Honiton's historic street market needs to be improved. The town needs to celebrate more its history of lace making and pottery and an annual festival has been suggested.



TRANSFER OF SERVICES

The Council is already responsible for a number of important local services and has considered what other services could possibly be devolved/transferred to the Town Council to enable its Priorities to be achieved; these might be:

- Grass cutting, grounds maintenance and highway verges
- Parking enforcement
- Car parks
- Toilets: Lace Walk (King St PC already transferred to HTC)
- Street signs (as Agent for the Highway Authority)
- Playing fields and open spaces: Honiton Bottom, The Glen, Millenium Green, Allhallows
- Play Areas
- Town centre public spaces
- Leisure facilities
- Tourism and Tourist information centres
- Economic Development: support for new and existing businesses
- Street cleanliness: weeds and litter picking
- Condition of pavements and footpaths

The Town Council will work with other statutory agencies to promote their services and act as agent.

Should services be devolved to HTC this will provide the Council with opportunities to improve services, engage volunteers, operate at lower overhead costs and to take care of elements of town management that are important to the Town Council and to residents, having been frustrated previously due to lack of action. HTC will then be able to set its own priorities, develop strategies and work specifically for Honiton's electorate.



The Council will provide those services to an improved standard and at lower cost to the taxpayer; however, it is unlikely that sufficient funding will accompany any devolution and as a consequence some difficult decisions will probably be necessary to provide sustainable funding. That may require the Council to increase Precept.

The 'Vision for Honiton' document identifies that the population of the town has ballooned from 5,000 to 12,000 in just 35 years. Unfortunately essential services, facilities and infrastructure have not kept up with this rate of increase, which means that services are oversubscribed and facilities are inaccessible. It is possible that devolution will enable the Town Council to be more influential in correcting these deficiencies and to be able to plan improved facilities for Honiton's community.



It is likely that a new unitary authority will not wish to take on discretionary services and that would alternatively require and enable local councils to build resilience, further improve governance, accountability and engage with the community, strengthening local distinctiveness.

The adoption of new services by the Town Council will mean that the number of staff being employed by HTC will need to be increased. This will also mean that additional office space will be needed and a depot for grounds maintenance services.