

Cornwall Council issues demand for funds to hold 'fifth nation' referendum

Lee Trehwela: Local Democracy Reporter Cornwall

Published in the Cornish Times - 18th September 2025

Cornwall Council is pushing for recognition as the UK's fifth nation and calling on the Government to fund a referendum, despite current governmental preference for a mayoral devolution deal.

The leader of Cornwall Council has asked if the government will spend £1.5-million allowing the people of the Duchy to have their say in a fifth nation referendum. His comments come after the council agreed in July to write to the government seeking approval to be recognised as the fifth nation of the UK.

The move was supported by a separate petition containing over 24,000 signatures which also called on the government to give Cornwall – which already has national minority status – the same national footing as Wales and Scotland.

Despite the Cornish pressure on the government, the ministry of housing, communities and local government has cocked a snook at the petition and says it still favours a mayor-led devolution deal and that Cornwall's minority status does not prevent it from partnering with authorities in Devon and the wider South-West.

At a meeting of Cornwall Council, the administration was asked about the chances of a referendum on the issue. A member of the public stated: "The latest Parliamentary petition calling for Cornwall to be recognised as a nation was backed by the council using taxpayer funds. It attracted less than three per cent electoral support. Will the council now let Cornwall decide its own future and organise a referendum?"

Council leader Cllr Leigh Frost responded: "The petition was started completely independently of the council but given that the petition mirrored the wording of the motion agreed in this Chamber on July 22, the council promoted the petition in a number of social media posts at negligible cost.

"The more pertinent question is will the government now let Cornwall decide its own future and give us the money to hold a referendum, because it's a £1.5-million estimated cost to hold one?

"Because at the moment the only way Cornwall can achieve greater powers and funding beyond those already acquired is to create a mayoral combined authority over a wider footprint than just Cornwall.

"Far less than 24,000 signatures have been required to convince the government of local backing for setting up new mayoral government structures in different parts of the country."

He added: "This is also about a combination of public sentiment and legal argument in the form of our national minority status, all pointing to why Cornwall should be recognised as a nation, which would protect Cornwall for having to stand up to government when every relevant bill debate or boundary review comes forward."

In response to another public question concerning fifth nation status, Cllr Frost stressed that Cornwall Council was not asking to become a devolved administration with its own assembly or government "at this point".

He said any talk of how it would demonstrate "readiness, transparency and how it will impact governance and local services" if fifth nation status was agreed was not relevant.

"What we are calling for, alongside recognition as a nation of the UK, is for Cornwall not to be lumped into a one-size-fits-all mayoral combined authority, which is the government's preferred option in the current bill."