Council

Monday, 17th March, 2025

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Juma Begum (Mayor), Councillor Joanna Kane (Deputy Mayor), and Councillors Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, William Boyd, Claire Davies, Matthew Dormer, James Fardoe, Andrew Fry, Bill Hartnett, Sharon Harvey, Chris Holz, Sid Khan, Wanda King, Alan Mason, Sachin Mathur, Gemma Monaco, David Munro, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, Craig Warhurst, Ian Woodall and Paul Wren

Officers:

Peter Carpenter, Nicola Cummings, Claire Felton and Sue Hanley

Principal Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley-Hill

74. WELCOME

The Mayor welcomed all those present to the meeting.

75. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Brandon Clayton and Rita Rogers.

76. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Matthew Dormer, Andrew Fry and Craig Warhurst declared other disclosable interests in Minute Item No. 78 – Local Government Reorganisation – Interim Plan Proposals for Worcestershire – Redditch - in their capacity as Worcestershire County Councillors. They remained present throughout the debate in respect of this item and voted thereon.

77. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 24th February 2025 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Mayor.

Chair

78. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION - INTERIM PLAN PROPOSALS FOR WORCESTERSHIRE - REDDITCH

The Leader presented a report concerning Local Government Reorganisation interim plan proposals for Worcestershire and in doing so higlighted that the interim plan had been attached at Appendix 5 to the report.

Council was informed that the Government's English Devolution White Paper had introduced a requirement for all remaining two-tier authority areas to become unitary authorities in a process of Local Government Reorganisation. There was no alternative option to this reorganisation and Members were asked to note that it was therefore essential that the Council considered the options available carefully.

Clarification was provided that there were three potential options that had been identified as available for Local Government Reorganisation locally, in terms of proposals for consideration at this interim stage in the process:

- Option 1 – One Unitary Authority for the whole of Worcestershire (covering the full area served by Worcestershire County Council and the six District Councils in the county).
- Option 2 – Two Unitary Authorities, one for North Worcestershire (covering the footprint of Redditch Borough, Bromsgrove District and Wyre Forest District Councils) and one for South Worcestershire (covering the footprint of Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wychavon District Councils).
- Option 3 – Exploring both models, in terms of both a single Unitary Authority and two Unitary Authorities in Worcestershire (representing the areas outlined in Options 1 and 2 above).

The Government had required that Councils in a two-tier authority area, like Worcestershire, should work together to develop proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in their locality. Councils were required to submit interim proposals to the Government by 21st March 2025. The Leader had been meeting with the other Leaders of Councils in Worcestershire by attending meetings of the Worcestershire Leaders' Board alongside the Chief Executive Officers of those Councils. At those meetings, the Leader had been highlighting his view that both potential models of reorganisation should be investigated further, in line with Option 3.

Confirmation was provided that Worcestershire County Council had unilaterally commissioned work from PricewaterhouseCoopers

(PwC). A copy of this paper had been published for Redditch Borough Councillors' consideration in a Background Papers pack for the meeting. However, Members were asked to note that this document did not form part of the interim response that had been agreed by Leaders at meetings of the Worcestershire Leaders' Board. The assumptions underpinning this work had not been shared with District Councils by Worcestershire County Council, despite requests to do so. When the paper had been presented at a recent meeting of Worcestershire Leaders' Board, concerns had been raised about the fact that the assumptions had not been shared and the Leader confirmed that he had also raised concerns that he felt that the content appeared to be biased in favour of a single Unitary Authority for Worcestershire. The Leader advised that he had asked Officers at Redditch Borough Council to commission a separate piece of work to undertake an independent analysis and thereby hopefully provide a clearer picture of the implications of the different available models.

Reference was made to the different positions of the various Councils in Worcestershire and the Leader highlighted that further information had been included on this subject in the interim plan. Confirmation was provided that all of the District Councils, apart from Wyre Forest District Council, were due to consider the interim responses at meetings of their full Council scheduled to take place in March 2025. Wyre Forest District Council had already determined its position at a meeting of Council held in February 2025 when Members had debated a Motion on Notice on the subject. Worcestershire County Council was due to consider the matter at a meeting of the County Council's Cabinet in March, which would be pre-scrutinised at a meeting of the County's Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board.

In reviewing the options available, the suggestion was made that Members needed to ensure that the best option possible for Redditch residents was introduced. There were particular assets owned by Redditch Borough Council that were valued by local communities and there would be a need to ensure that these remained available for residents to enjoy in the future.

The Leader advised that he had attended the latest District Council Network (DCN) Conference, held the week commencing 10th March 2025. During this meeting, clarity had been provided by Jim McMahon MP, Minister of state for Local Government and English Devolution in the United Kingdom, with regard to requirements in terms of the population that would need to be served by any new Unitary Authorities. The English Devolution White Paper had referred to new Unitary Authorities generally being expected to serve populations of circa 500,000. However, at the DCN Conference, it had been clarified that new Unitary Authorities

serving populations of a smaller size would be considered and there were a range of factors that would influence the Government's decisions in terms of new Unitary Authority structures, including population, financial implications and localism.

The Government had been clear that Councils in two-tier authority areas were expected to work together and to collaborate on proposals. Whilst legal powers were not currently available to the Government to enable it to intervene where collaboration did not occur, there was the possibility that this could be introduced in forthcoming legislation. Should this occur, there was a risk that decisions about Local Government Reorganisation in an area could be imposed by the Government in cases where local authorities could not demonstrate that they had been working together collaboratively.

Following the presentation of the report, Members discussed Local Government Reorganisation in detail. Members noted that at this stage in the process, insufficient data was available to enable Councillors to make informed decisions concerning a preferred option for reorganisation. There was also general consensus that it was important to be able to demonstrate to the Government that the Council remained open minded and prepared to investigate both options further. For this reason, Members agreed that they needed to endorse the interim plan agreed by Leaders at Worcestershire Leaders' Board, in which Option 3 had been proposed for further investigation.

Concerns were raised regarding the report that had been produced by PwC on behalf of Worcestershire County Council. In particular, Members expressed disappointment that the assumptions underpinning this document had not been shared with District Councils. Various Members expressed concerns that the content of this report appeared to be biased in favour of a single Unitary Authority for Worcestershire. Members also noted that the report suggested that whilst the costs of a single Unitary Authority would be paid back within a year, the equivalent period quoted for two Unitary Authorities had been 11 years and Members questioned the basis for these estimates.

The Section 151 Officer clarified that a single Unitary Authority would be cheaper to establish than two Unitary Authorities. However, it was not possible to test whether the figures included in the PwC report were accurate because the assumptions underpinning this had not been shared with District Councils, despite requests for that information. The content of the report needed to be regarded cautiously until this occurred and Members were asked to note that by contrast, in previous reviews of other areas considering unitarisation, such as Yorkshire, PwC had

estimated that the costs for one Unitary Authority would be recovered in one year compared to two-and-a-half years for two Unitary Authorities serving the same geographic area. A major concern remained how to address the £70 million budget gap presently at Worcestershire County Council, which would need to be taken into account when reviewing the base budget position for a future Unitary Authority or two Unitary Authorities. It was estimated that 70 per cent of Worcestershire County Council's budget, like many County Councils, was allocated to social care costs and these pressures would remain regardless of which model of Unitary Authority(ies) were adopted in the county.

Reference was made to the ways in which Redditch differed from other parts of Worcestershire. This included acknowledging that Redditch Borough was a predominantly urban area in a largely rural county. The demographics of Redditch, including the significantly higher levels of employment of Redditch residents in manufacturing jobs compared to other parts of the county was highlighted as was the fact Redditch residents tended to travel North and East for work, rather than to the West and South into Worcestershire. The health inequalities in the Borough, which Members suggested was a situation more similar to populations living in larger urban conurbations than to rural parts of Worcestershire, were also considered. Members noted that this had not been addressed in the interim plan report, although it was acknowledged that specific details had not been included in respect of any of the Districts in this document, so Redditch had not been treated differently in this regard.

The projected future population figures included in the report were also cited and Members suggested that these figures did not necessarily accurately reflect the likely population trends for the future in the Borough. The suggestion was made that these figures, which indicated that the population was likely to reduce in Redditch, were inaccurate because significant levels of housing development were due to take place in the Borough in forthcoming years in line with Government targets. Officers clarified that these figures had been based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) data which had been used in the report when providing projections for all of the Districts and it had been felt that a consistent approach should be applied to all areas in respect of this matter.

During consideration of this item, concerns were raised that Redditch and the Leisure and Cultural assets in the Borough tended to receive limited promotion when considered at a sub-regional level. For example, the latest edition of the 'What's on in Worcestershire' publication was highlighted as containing very few details relating to Redditch. Concerns were raised in this context

that Redditch could be neglected in a single Unitary Authority serving the whole of Worcestershire.

Questions were raised about the viability of a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority, given the suggestion in the Government's English Devolution White Paper that there would be a general expectation that populations of circa 500,000 would need to be served by new Unitary Authorities. Officers clarified that further guidance had since been issued by the Government on this subject. This had clarified that 500,000 was a guiding principle but not a hard target. The Government had been clear that there were a number of issues that would be taken into account when determining final Unitary Authority structures including population, financial implications, governance, localism and closeness to communities. Members were asked to note that there were already some efficient Unitary Authorities in existence that served much smaller populations than 500,000.

The position of Wyre Forest District Council was discussed at the meeting. Members commented that some Wyre Forest District Councillors had been very clear that they were opposed to joining Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District in a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority. Questions were raised about whether a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority could be established, given this opposition. Members were advised that each authority was a sovereign Council and would need to make the decisions the Members of that Council felt to be most appropriate for their communities. Final submissions to Government, due in November 2025, would need to take into account the evidence that had been gathered.

In discussing this matter, Members questioned whether any consideration had been given to introducing two Unitary Authorities representing the east and west of the county. The Leader advised that he would be open to considering this option. However, Members were asked to note that at the Worcestershire Leaders' Board the Leaders had concluded that only two models would be viable for the county; a single Unitary Authority for the whole of the county and two Unitary Authorities representing the north and south of the county.

The opportunities created by introducing Unitary Authorities were discussed. Members commented that a Unitary Authority would have more powers in respect of economic investment. The suggestion was made that these opportunities needed to be explored further as part of the next stage of the process, in relation to both models of Unitary Authority. There were also opportunities highlighted in respect of localism and continuing to meet the needs of local communities. In addressing this, Members noted that public

consultation would be important as well as a need to develop trust amongst residents in the democratic process.

The position of Parish and Town Councils was briefly discussed. Members noted that in a larger Unitary Authority environment it was likely that there would be a desire to introduce more Town and Parish Councils in the Borough, with certain powers being delegated to the Parish level. This would take time to arrange and Members commented that they would need to consider these arrangements moving forward.

The extent to which the Council was likely to have any greater certainty regarding future operating models prior to November was discussed. Officers clarified that within the Interim Plan written feedback from the Government on the options had been requested. However, the Interim Plan stage had always been intended as a first step in the process and final decisions were not anticipated at this stage

Council discussed the timescales available between March and November 2025 in which to explore the two options for Local Government Reorganisation further. Concerns were raised that these timescales were very tight which could create challenges. In response, Officers advised that there would be a need for Officers representing the authority to be involved in discussions. It was likely that both a strategic board of Leaders and a strategic board of Chief Executive Officers would need to meet regularly to discuss the matter, including consideration of the many risks associated with Local Government Reorganisation and mitigating actions required to address those risks. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) would need to be developed detailing how partner authorities would work together. In addition, there would be a lot of operational matters to discuss. There was the possibility that there would be a need for assistance from external organisations to help ensure that work was completed according to deadline.

The content of the report was discussed and it was noted that the covering report stated that there were no climate change implications arising from the proposals detailed in the report. Members suggested that this statement was not necessarily accurate, on the basis that Redditch Borough Council had declared a climate emergency and had set a deadline date on which to become carbon neutral. It was noted that other local authorities in Worcestershire might have made a similar decision in the past and aligning commitments such as this would need to be considered as part of the reorganisation process moving forward.

In discussing Local Government Reorganisation, Members commented that it was important for District Council representatives

to work together. The suggestion was made that District Councils should collectively commission a paper from an external organisation that explored the available options and the implications of these options. In addition, Members commented that a strategic board of District Council representatives, chaired by an independent person, could be established to consider the options and evidence basis further. There was general consensus that this represented a good idea moving forward, although some Members questioned whether all District Council Leaders would sign up to the proposals and it was noted that Redditch Borough Council could not unilaterally decide to establish this board or to take this action as the other District Councils would need to be consulted on the proposal. Therefore, a request was made for this suggestion to be recorded in the minutes and for Officers and the Leader to raise this idea during future meetings with representatives of the other District Councils in Worcestershire.

As part of the next stage, Members commented that it would be useful to learn lessons from other parts of the country that had already gone through the process of introducing Unitary Authorities to replace previous two-tier local government structures. The example of Northamptonshire was cited as part of this debate: Members noted that Northamptonshire County Council had had a Section 114 Notice issued and subsequently two Unitary Authorities had been introduced in that county which appeared to be working well.

In concluding their discussions, Members sought to reassure the public that whilst Local Government Reorganisation was taking place, normal service delivery at the Council would continue.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor Joe Baker and seconded by Councillor Matthew Dormer.

RESOLVED that

1) the Interim Plan, which identifies two options for a unitary structure in Worcestershire, be adopted as the Council's interim plan response. This is to be sent to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government setting out the Council's position on local government re-organisation and devolution; and

2) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive and the Assistant Director of Legal, Democratic and Procurement Services to make any final amendments to the Council's interim plan response following consultation with Group Leaders.

79. URGENT BUSINESS - GENERAL (IF ANY)

There was no urgent business for consideration at this meeting.

Prior to closing the meeting, the Mayor highlighted that former Councillor and former Mayor of the Borough of Redditch, Mrs Madge Tillsley MBE, had sadly passed away since the previous meeting of Council. The Mayor led Members in paying tribute to Mrs Tillsley by observing a minute's silence in her honour.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.31 pm