



Extraordinary Council

Mon 17 Mar
2025
7.00 pm

Oakenshaw Community
Centre,
Castleditch Lane,
Redditch
B98 7YB



If you have any queries on this Agenda please contact
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GUIDANCE ON FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

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If you have any questions regarding the agenda or attached papers, please do not hesitate to contact the officer named above.

Notes:

Although this is a public meeting, there are circumstances when Council might have to move into closed session to consider exempt or confidential information. For agenda items that are exempt, the public are excluded and for any such items the live stream will be suspended and that part of the meeting will not be recorded.



Council

Monday, 17th March, 2025

7.00 pm

Oakenshaw Community Centre

Agenda

Membership:

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

- 1. Welcome**
- 2. Apologies for Absence**
- 3. Declarations of Interest**

To invite Councillors to declare any Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Disclosable Interests they may have in items on the agenda, and to confirm the nature of those interests.

- 4. Minutes (Pages 5 - 20)**
- 5. Local Government Reorganisation - Interim Plan Proposals for Worcestershire - Redditch (Pages 21 - 58)**
- 6. Urgent Business - general (if any)**

To consider any additional items exceptionally agreed by the Mayor as Urgent Business in accordance with the powers vested in him by virtue of Section 100(B)(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972.

(This power should be exercised only in cases where there are genuinely special circumstances which require consideration of an item which has not previously been published on the Order of Business for the meeting.)

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Council

Monday, 24th February,
2025

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Juma Begum, Joanna Kane, Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, William Boyd, Brandon Clayton, Claire Davies, Matthew Dormer, James Fardoe, Bill Hartnett, Sharon Harvey, Wanda King, Sachin Mathur, Gemma Monaco, David Munro, Rita Rogers, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, Craig Warhurst and Ian Woodall

Officers:

Peter Carpenter, Claire Felton and Sue Hanley

Democratic Services Officers:

Jess Bayley-Hill

65. WELCOME

The Mayor welcomed all those present to the meeting.

66. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Andrew Fry, Chris Holz, Sid Khan and Alan Mason.

67. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were advised that all Councillors had been granted a general dispensation earlier in the year by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to take part in the debate and vote on matters relating to the budget and Council Tax.

There were no declarations of interest.

68. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of Council held on Monday 27th January 2025 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Mayor.

Chair

69. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The following announcements were made during the meeting:

a) The Mayor's Announcements

A written record of some of the key civic engagements that had been attended by the Mayor in January and February 2025 was tabled at the meeting for Members' consideration (Appendix A).

b) The Leader's Announcements

The Leader advised that he had attended and chaired a recent meeting of the Worcestershire Leaders' Board, which had also been attended by the Chief Executive. The main subject of discussion at this meeting had been devolution and Local Government Reorganisation. During this meeting, the Leader had conveyed the view that his preferred option for devolution locally would be to have a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority serving the Borough of Redditch. However, it was recognised that at this stage Members should remain open to considering two distinct options; one unitary authority for the whole county as one option and two unitary authorities, for the north and south of the county, as an alternative option. This approach had been supported by five of the seven Leaders who had been in attendance at the meeting.

A report would be prepared on the subject of devolution for consideration at the extraordinary Council meeting, due to take place on 17th March 2025. The Leader expressed the view that the Council needed to assure residents that no option would be adopted without first being subject to a thorough review. Members were advised that the Leader would undertake to work with the leader of the opposition to consider what would best work for the people of Redditch.

During consideration of this item, the Leader highlighted that this was due to be the last ordinary Council meeting that would be attended by the current Chief Executive and the current Deputy Chief Executive. As such, the Leader commented that he wished to use the opportunity to place on record his thanks to both officers for their hard work and support. The leader of the opposition and Councillor Davies were also invited to contribute their comments as part of this process.

In paying tribute to the Deputy Chief Executive, Members commented that he was an officer who worked with sincerity, integrity and, at appropriate times, with humour. When he had

first commenced employment with the Council, there had been a number of challenges which he had worked hard, alongside the Financial Services team, to address. Members recognised that the Deputy Chief Executive had worked extremely hard, often working late hours and at weekends, to ensure that the Council's financial situation was managed efficiently, and in accordance with Members' decisions.

Members subsequently paid tribute to the Chief Executive and in doing so recognised that she had worked for many years for Redditch Borough Council, having been promoted through a number of positions in her career up to a senior level. Over the last 15 years, the Chief Executive had served initially as Deputy Chief Executive for Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Councils, managing shared services across the two authorities, before stepping up to the position of joint Chief Executive following the retirement of the previous Chief Executive. Throughout her career, Members expressed the view that the Chief Executive had placed the community at the heart of everything that she did and had always worked hard to identify constructive solutions to any issues raised by Members.

Members concluded their remarks by extending their best wishes for the future to both the Chief Executive and the Deputy Chief Executive.

c) The Chief Executive's Announcements

The Chief Executive thanked Members for their comments and confirmed that she had no announcements to make on this occasion.

70. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Members considered recommendations arising from two meetings of the Executive Committee, held on 4th February and 24th February 2025. As the latter meeting had taken place directly before Council, there were no minutes from that meeting available for consideration at the Council meeting but Members did debate and determine the recommendations.

Pay Policy Statement 2025/26

The Pay Policy Statement 2025/26 was considered by Members. In discussing the report, Members noted that there was a legal requirement for the Pay Policy Statement, which detailed the pay for all staff employed by the authority, to be published on an annual basis by the end of March each year.

During consideration of this report, questions were raised about the extent to which the Council had access to information about the gender pay gap at the authority. Members were advised that the Council did have access to this data and this would be addressed in a report that was due to be considered by Members later in the year.

Reference was also made to the pay scales that applied to posts at grades 1 – 11, with Members noting that the top scale point on one grade was often the same as the bottom scale of the grade above. In this context, Members questioned whether staff promoted up one grade might be expected to take on additional responsibilities in a new role whilst initially not receiving any further pay in recognition for this work. In responding, Officers advised that an assumption could not be made that an officer would have always reached the top scale of their previous grade before they were promoted. However, there was flexibility available to managers to move staff onto a higher scale in a new grade in cases where this was felt to be appropriate.

Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 Report

The Mayor opened this item by explaining that recommendations had been proposed on the subject of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2025/26 to 2027/28 at both the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 4th February and at the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 24th February 2025. To ensure clarity in the decision-making process on the budget, the Mayor proposed that both sets of recommendations should be considered at the same time at the meeting. Members were also asked to note that no alternative budgets had been received in advance of the meeting for consideration and therefore would not be considered at the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance subsequently presented the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 report for Members' consideration. Members were reminded that the budget had been considered in two tranches in a similar manner to 2024/25. The second tranche had been amended to take into account the Local Government Financial Settlement for the Council, which had been confirmed on 3rd February 2025. In advance of the settlement being announced, the local government sector had been advised that core spending power would be increasing for Councils by 6 per cent. However, Redditch Borough Council, like many District Councils, had received a 0 per cent increase. The Government had also assumed in the settlement that the Council would increase Council Tax by 2.99 per cent and if this did not occur, there would be an additional pressure in the budget.

The Local Government Financial Settlement provided in 2025/26 had been a one-year settlement only. In 2026/27, the government had indicated that there would be a move to a three-year funding settlement for local government. However, there remained uncertainty over the funding formula that would be used by that point. The Government was due to consult on proposed changes to funding arrangements and the Council would need to contribute to this consultation process.

The MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 recorded a deficit position over the three years of the budget. The conclusion had been reached that it would not be appropriate to cut services at this stage in order to address the deficit because there was the potential that through devolution, those services would need to be reintroduced, potentially at a greater cost. In this context, the deficit would need to be funded from reserves in order to achieve a balanced position.

In terms of debts, the Council only had debts recorded in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for long-term borrowing and there were no debts accrued in the general fund. As such, the Council was considered to be in a stronger financial position than many neighbouring authorities.

The impending Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation meant that Redditch Borough Council would no longer exist in a few years' time. In preparation for the move to unitary authority status, it was recognised that Members would wish to work hard on legacy schemes that would benefit residents of the Borough of Redditch in the future. All schemes would need to meet strict criteria to ensure sustainability and the Council would not be letting reserves fall below £5 million, which was twice the minimum level recommended by the Government.

The MTFP contained a statement from the Section 151 Officer. This had recorded that the budget proposals were considered to be robust, although the deficit position in the budget had been highlighted as had other risks to the Council's finances. Action that could be taken to mitigate these risks had been addressed in the report, which would include maximising opportunities to apply for grant funding.

In concluding the presentation of the report, the Portfolio Holder for Finance read out and proposed the 10 recommendations on the budget that had been recommended at the Executive Committee meeting held on 4th February 2025 alongside the recommendation on the budget that had been proposed at the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 24th February 2025.

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Following the presentation of the report, Councillor Matthew Dormer advised that, although his group had not chosen to submit an alternative budget, they were minded to oppose some of the recommendations detailed in the budget papers. This included opposition to proposals in respect of the funding of the Shopmobility Service and opposition to the proposed Ward Member budgets, which he suggested would have been more appropriate for an application process.

Members were also asked to note that Council Tax was higher in the Borough of Redditch than in other parts of Worcestershire and the suggestion was made that a freeze would need to be applied to Council Tax at some point, prior to the introduction of a unitary authority, in order to regularise payments across the new authority area. With this in mind, a request was made to amend paragraph 3.20 of the report to incorporate the following statement:

“That a potential freeze of Council Tax is seen as a high priority and a business case is produced to enable this to happen.”

In response, concerns were raised about amending the report to incorporate this wording. Members noted that there was a lot of uncertainty, on the date of the meeting, with respect to future funding for local government as well as the structure of local government in Worcestershire. In this context, it was suggested that it would not be prudent for the Council to commit to a business case that focused on freezing Council Tax, as this might not be sustainable moving forward.

Reference was made to a meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Working Group (BSWG) at which the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 report had been pre-scrutinised. Members noted that, based on discussions at the meeting, recommendations had been made on the subject of the report which had been considered and rejected at the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 24th February 2025.

Concerns were raised that an increase to Council Tax of 2.99 per cent at a time when fees and charges were also due to increase generally by 4 per cent would place an increased burden on Redditch residents.

At the end of the debate in respect of the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28, it was agreed that separate votes should be taken in respect of the recommendations from the Executive Committee. In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014 all of these votes were undertaken as formal recorded votes.

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The vote in respect of recommendations 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and the recommendation from the Executive Committee meeting held on 24th February 2025 on the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 was recorded as follows:

Members voting FOR the recommendations:

Councillors Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, Juma Begum, William Boyd, Brandon Clayton, Claire Davies, Matthew Dormer, Bill Hartnett, James Fardoe, Sharon Harvey, Joanna Kane, Wanda King, Sachin Mathur, Gemma Monaco, David Munro, Rita Rogers, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, Craig Warhurst and Ian Woodall (22).

Members voting AGAINST the recommendations

No councillors (0).

Members ABSTAINING in the vote

No councillors (0)

Therefore, on being put to the vote, recommendations 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and the recommendation from the Executive Committee meeting held on 24th February 2025 on the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 report were carried.

The vote in respect of recommendations 3 and 8 on the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 was subject to a separate named vote and the votes were recorded as follows:

Members voting FOR the recommendations

Councillors Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, Juma Begum, William Boyd, Claire Davies, James Fardoe, Bill Hartnett, Sharon Harvey, Joanna Kane, Wanda King, Sachin Mathur, David Munro, Rita Rogers, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, and Ian Woodall (18).

Members voting AGAINST the recommendations

Councillors Brandon Clayton, Matthew Dormer, Gemma Monaco and Craig Warhurst (4).

Members ABSTAINING in the vote

No councillors (0).

Therefore, on being put to the vote, recommendations 3 and 8 in the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 report were carried.

Local Development Scheme

The Leader presented the Local Development Scheme, which detailed a timetable for the development of a new Local Plan for the Borough of Redditch.

During consideration of this item, questions were raised about the extent to which the proposed delegation to the Assistant Director for Planning and Leisure Services, following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Governance, would remove Members' influence over the Local Plan process.

Assurances were provided to Members that this delegation applied only to the timetable and Members would continue to be involved in considering and approving the various elements of the Local Plan. In order to contribute to the Local Plan process, all Members were urged to attend meetings of the Planning Advisory Panel (PAP) at which the Local Plan would be discussed.

Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

The Portfolio Holder for Finance presented the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26 for Council's consideration and in doing so he proposed and read out each of the recommendations in turn.

In considering the report, Members thanked the Financial Services team for their hard work in preparing the document and reviewing the figures.

During consideration of this item, a typographical error was identified in recommendation 2(a) in the report. Members noted that this recommendation referred to a figure of "£50,366,2909.22" which should in fact have been recorded as "£50,366,290.22" and it was proposed that this recommendation should be amended accordingly.

Reference was made to the implications arising from the report in respect of residents living in Feckenham Parish and questions were raised about whether Feckenham Parish Council would be receiving £42 million under the proposals. Clarification was provided that Feckenham Parish Council would in fact only be receiving £60,000 in the process but this had to be listed alongside the rest of the precepting figures. Officers acknowledged that the way the Council Tax Resolutions were presented could be confusing but Members were advised that this presentation was required as there were strict legal criteria which guided how Council Tax Resolutions should be recorded.

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Consideration was given to the increase of 2.99 per cent to Council Tax that had been proposed for 2025/26. It was reiterated that this level of increase was required to Council Tax in order to achieve a sustainable and balanced budget position moving forward.

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014 Members determined the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26 by taking a formal named vote and the votes were recorded as follows:

Members voting FOR the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

Councillors Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, Juma Begum, William Boyd, Claire Davies, James Fardoe, Bill Hartnett, Sharon Harvey, Joanna Kane, Wanda King, Sachin Mathur, David Munro, Rita Rogers, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, and Ian Woodall (18).

Members voting AGAINST the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

Councillors Brandon Clayton, Matthew Dormer, Gemma Monaco and Craig Warhurst (4).

Members ABSTAINING in the vote on the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

No Councillors (0).

Therefore, on being put to the vote, the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26 were carried.

RESOLVED

- 1) that the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 4th February 2025 be approved and all recommendations adopted;**
- 2) that the additional risk, in terms of access to existing former Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership funds from Birmingham City Council in 2025/26 is added to the Risk Log for the Medium Term Financial Plan;**
- 3) that Redditch Borough Council Local Development Scheme 2025 be approved as the Council's programme for plan-making, effective as of 24th February 2025;**

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- 4) that delegated authority be granted to the Assistant Director for Planning and Leisure Services, following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Governance, to approve updates to the Local Development Scheme as required;
- 5) the calculation for the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2025/26 (excluding parish precepts) as £7,345,116.71;
- 6) that the following amounts be calculated for the year 2025/26 in accordance with sections 31 to 36 of the Act:
 - a) £50,366,209.22 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in section 31A(2) of the Act (taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils) (i.e., gross expenditure);
 - b) £42,961,173.51 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in section 31A(3) of the Act. (i.e. gross income);
 - c) £7,405,116.71 being the amount by which the aggregate of resolution 6(a) above exceeds the aggregate of resolution 6(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with section 31A(4) of the Act, as its Council Tax requirement for the year. (Item R in the formula in section 31B of the Act);
 - d) £279.91 being the amount at resolution 6(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (Resolution (a) of Executive Committee minute item 84 from the minutes of 24th February 2025), calculated by the Council, in accordance with section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including parish precepts);
 - e) £60,000 being the aggregate amount of all special items (Feckenham Parish precept) referred to in section 34(1) of the Act;
 - f) £277.64 being the amount at Resolution 6(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at resolution 6(e) above by Item T (Resolution (a) of Executive Committee minute item 84 from the minutes of 24th February 2025), calculated by the Council, in accordance with section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for

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dwelling in those parts of its area to which no parish precept relates.

- g) £434.67 being the amount given by adding to the amount at Resolution 6(f) the amount for the special item relating to the parish of Feckenham 6(e), divided by the amount in Resolution (b) of Executive Committee minute item 84 from the minutes of 24th February 2025.
- h) the amounts shown below given by multiplying the amounts at Resolution 6(f) and Resolution 6(g) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band, divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwelling listed in band D, calculated in accordance with section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwelling listed in different valuation bands.

Valuation Band	Proportion of Band D paid	Feckenham Parish Council Precept £	Parish of Feckenham Total £	All other parts of the council area £
A	6/9ths	104.69	289.78	185.09
B	7/9ths	122.13	338.07	215.94
C	8/9ths	139.58	386.37	246.79
D	1	157.03	434.67	277.64
E	11/9ths	191.93	531.27	339.34
F	13/9ths	226.82	627.86	401.04
G	15/9ths	261.72	724.45	462.73
H	18/9ths	314.06	869.34	555.28

- 7) It is to be noted that for the year 2025/26, Worcestershire County Council, Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia, and Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority have issued precepts to the Council in accordance with section 40 of the Act for each category of dwelling in the Council's area as indicated below:

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	Valuation Bands							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Worcestershire County Council	1,077.14	1,256.66	1,436.19	1,615.71	1,974.76	2,333.80	2,692.85	3,231.42
Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia	194.33	226.72	259.11	291.50	356.28	421.06	485.83	583.00
Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority	68.15	79.50	90.86	102.22	124.94	147.65	170.37	204.44

- 8) that having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at Resolution 6(h) and Resolution 7, that Redditch Borough Council in accordance with sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 hereby sets the amounts shown below as the amounts of Council Tax for 2025/26 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

Valuation Band	Proportion of band D paid	Parish of Feckenham Total £	All other parts £
A	6/9ths	1,629.40	1,524.71
B	7/9ths	1,900.95	1,778.82
C	8/9ths	2,172.53	2,032.95
D	1	2,444.10	2,287.07
E	11/9ths	2,987.25	2,795.32
F	13/9ths	3,530.37	3,303.55
G	15/9ths	4,073.50	3,811.78
H	18/9ths	4,888.20	4,574.14

- 9) the Director of Resources is authorised to make payments under section 90(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 from the collection fund by ten equal instalments between April 2025 to March 2026 as detailed below

	Precept (£)	Surplus/Deficit on Collection Fund (£)	Total to Pay (£)
Worcestershire County Council	42,744,416.00	708,645.00	43,453,061.00
Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia	7,711,778.25	127,783.69	7,839,561.94
Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority	2,704,281.25	44,768.03	2,749,049.28

- 10) the Director of Resources is authorised to make transfers under section 97 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 from the collection fund to the general

fund the sum of £7,405,116.71 being the Council's own demand on the collection fund (£7,345,116.71) and parish precepts (£60,000) and the distribution of the surplus/deficit on the collection fund (£125,184.84);

- 11) that the Director of Resources is authorised to make payments from the general fund to Feckenham Parish Council the sums listed above (£60,000) by two equal instalments on 1st April 2025 and 1st October 2025 in respect of the precept levied on the Council;
- 12) that the above resolutions to be signed by the Chief Executive for use in legal proceedings in the Magistrates' Court for the recovery of unpaid Council Taxes; and
- 13) notices of the making of the said Council Taxes signed by the Chief Executive are given by advertisement in the local press under section 38(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

(During consideration of this item, there was a brief adjournment from 19.50 – 19.56.)

71. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2024 - 2025

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee presented the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2024/25.

Members were advised that it had been an informative and, at times, entertaining year in Overview and Scrutiny. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee expressed the view that the key to constructive scrutiny was Member participation and it was suggested that the more Members contributed to the process the more they would feel that they were making a difference to their community. He concluded by expressing his hopes that Members had found the Overview and Scrutiny process to be useful and he thanked Members for their hard work.

The Vice Chair of the Committee subsequently addressed Council and in doing so highlighted the hard work of the Budget Scrutiny Working Group, the Fly Tipping Task Group, the Performance Scrutiny Working Group and the Post-16 Education Task Group for Council's consideration. In considering the report, Members were asked to note that Overview and Scrutiny was conducted in a cross-party, apolitical manner and had the potential to make a difference to local communities by bringing forward recommendations based on evidence gathered by Members.

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In responding to the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2024/25, the Leader commented that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, together with the various Working Groups and Task Groups, had undertaken a lot of work during the year. Members were asked to note that Overview and Scrutiny had an important role to play in holding the Executive Committee to account and whilst this could be difficult, it was valued by the Executive. It was recognised that Overview and Scrutiny could make a real difference to the communities served by the Council and the recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny Members were taken seriously when debated at Executive Committee meetings. The Leader concluded by thanking members of both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and of the scrutiny Working Groups and Task Groups for their hard work.

72. URGENT BUSINESS - RECORD OF DECISIONS

The Mayor confirmed that one urgent decision had been taken since the previous meeting of Council on the subject of the Promoting Independent Living Service (PIL). A copy of the urgent decision form had been provided for information and the urgent decision was not subject to debate.

73. URGENT BUSINESS - GENERAL (IF ANY)

There was no urgent business for consideration on this occasion.

The Meeting commenced at 7.04 pm
and closed at 8.47 pm

Minutes Appendix 1 - Council – 24th February 2025

Item 5 (a) The Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor has attended the following civic events in January and February 2025:

January:

21st January: Redditch Magistrates Court Opening

26th January: Holocaust Memorial Day

February:

13th February: Redditch Mayoral Charity Valentine Afternoon Tea.

21st February: Redditch Mayoral Visit to Bromsgrove Primrose Hospice.

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Local Government Re-organisation – Interim Plan Proposals for Worcestershire – Redditch

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor J Baker, Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Governance
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Senior Officers	Sue Hanley, Chief Executive. Claire Felton, Assistant Director for Legal, Democratic and Procurement Services
Report Authors Sue Hanley Claire Felton	Job Title: Chief Executive Contact email: s.hanley@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk Job Title: Assistant Director of Legal, Democratic and Procurement Services Contact email: c.felton@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk
Wards Affected	All Wards
Ward consulted Councillor(s)	N/A
Relevant Council Priority	All strategic priorities
If you have any questions about this report, please contact the report author in advance of the meeting.	

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to

- 1.1 CONSIDER the matters set out in this report relating to the Government’s intention to implement devolution and local government reorganisation; and**

RESOLVE

- 1.2 That the Interim Plan (as attached at Appendix 5) 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 devolution.**

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1.3 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.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Members of the proposals for local government devolution and re-organisation as set out in the recent government White Paper titled English Devolution White Paper published on 16th December 2024 (referred to in this report as the "white paper") by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government ("MHCLG"). A white paper is a statement of intent for future government legislation. It will be followed by an Act of Parliament. The exact timing of this new legislation is not known at this stage. The government has indicated that the new legislation will be titled the "English Devolution Act".

2.2 In the White Paper, the Government sets out its ambition to create new Strategic Authorities with an ultimate aim, in due course, for all areas to be covered by a Mayoral Strategic Authority. Alongside these changes increased levels of devolution would be introduced, in areas such as housing and planning, environment and climate change, business and research, skills and employment and transport.

2.3 In addition, and as a preparatory step towards the creation of Strategic Authorities for all areas, the Government is seeking local government reorganisation. This will apply to all remaining areas of two tier local government, i.e. areas where there are both County Councils and District Councils. Principal Councils in those areas have been formally invited by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution ("the Minister of State") to put forward proposals for the existing District and County Councils to be replaced by Unitary Councils.

2.4 The existing powers in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ("the 2007 Act") do not enable the government to impose unitary structures, and it is for this reason the language used is one of "inviting" proposals. However, it would be open to the government to legislate in the English Devolution Act to re-create powers of direction or to implement re-organisation directly by setting out a new structure to replace county and district councils.

2.5 A more detailed chronology of events since December 2024 and key dates going forward is attached at Appendix 1. On 8th January 2025 Worcestershire County Council wrote to the MHCLG asking to defer the

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2025 County Council elections. This request was rejected by the MHCLG. On 5th February 2025 the Minister wrote to all the Worcestershire authorities inviting the council leaders in the area to develop a proposal for single tier re-organisation (Appendix 2). The letter included a formal invitation for proposals under section 2 of the 2007 Act and guidance for the development of those proposals. A copy of the guidance is attached at Appendix 3. Senior officers have since been provided with more information on proposed timescales for the implementation of local government re-organisation by officials from the MHCLG.

- 2.6 The next key date in the re-organisation process is 21st March 2025 by which time the Council is required to submit its Interim Plan for re-organisation to the MHCLG. That document must set out the Council's preferred model or models of re-organisation, together with supporting information as set out at paragraph 3.12 of this report.
- 2.7 As set out in the main body of this report there is a strong emphasis under the White Paper on encouraging neighbouring authorities to collaborate and bring forward joint proposals. This is clearly indicated in the Ministerial Guidance at Appendix 3 which states: - *"the expectation is that one interim plan is jointly submitted by all councils in the area"*.
- 2.8 Discussions have been taking place between the Worcestershire Council Leaders supported by the Chief Executives from all seven Worcestershire Councils through the Worcestershire Leaders Board. The focus has been to prepare a draft interim plan setting out proposals for a unitary model or models covering the County as a whole.
- 2.9 Following a meeting of the Worcestershire Leaders Board on 6th March officers can report that all seven Councils have indicated their intention to move forward with a joint interim plan for Worcestershire. This will be subject to approval of that course of action by Members either through individual Council meetings or other processes as appropriate for the Councils concerned. A copy of the Interim Plan for Worcestershire is attached at Appendix 5.
- 2.10 The joint Interim Plan sets out two alternative models of either a county wide unitary or two unitaries based in the North and the South, and expresses the seven Worcestershire councils' commitment to working collaboratively to further examine the two options.
- 2.11 Members are being asked to consider the contents of this report and to adopt the Worcestershire wide Interim Plan as the Council's Interim Plan

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response for submission to the Ministry of Communities, Housing and Local Government.

3. OPERATIONAL ISSUES

Devolution

- 3.1 The principle of devolution is nothing new in terms of central government devolving power, funding and responsibilities held in Whitehall departments or central government bodies, down to local areas. To date devolution has been principally facilitated through the creation of new Combined Authorities as an additional tier of government under the democratic accountability of an Elected Mayor. These arrangements have been well established primarily in City Regions such as the Greater London Authority, Greater Manchester Combined Authority and West Midlands Combined Authority.
- 3.2 The previous Government sought to further progress devolution through the principle of County Deals, which aimed to provide a vehicle for devolution to be taken up in areas across England without a devolution deal. The County Deal approach was formulated in the February 2022 White Paper which committed to establishing a new model of Combined Authority that would enable devolution deals to be agreed by County Councils and/or Unitary Councils. Within the White Paper the Government announced nine areas which were to be negotiated first.
- 3.3 Following the election of a new Government, in July 2024 the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Local Government wrote to all Local Government Leaders setting out the new Government's ambition to widen and deepen devolution across England.

The English Devolution White Paper

- 3.5 On 16 December 2024 the Government published the English Devolution White Paper setting out a programme of devolution and Local Government reorganisation across England. The vision outlined by the Government is for all parts of England to be part of regional Strategic Authorities that have a regional Mayor. These Strategic Authorities will work in a similar way to existing Mayoral Combined Authorities. Strategic Authorities will have responsibility for driving growth and shaping public services across wider regional geographies.
- 3.6 There are three levels of Strategic Authorities proposed:

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- **Foundation Strategic Authorities:** these include non-mayoral Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities automatically. In exceptional circumstances, the Secretary of State will have the power to designate an individual Local Authority as a Foundation Strategic Authority.
 - **Mayoral Strategic Authorities:** the Greater London Authority, all Mayoral Combined Authorities and all Mayoral Combined County Authorities will automatically begin as Mayoral Strategic Authorities.
 - **Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities:** Those existing Combined Mayoral Authorities that meet specified eligibility criteria may be designated as Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities. This unlocks further devolution, most notably an Integrated Settlement
- 3.7 Under the new devolution framework, the government's preference is for partnerships that bring together more than one Local Authority over a wider geography. All combined authorities will be referred to as Strategic Authorities with the aim that all areas will have Mayoral Strategic Authorities.
- 3.8 Strategic Authorities will have defined areas of competence. These areas are:
- Transport and local infrastructure.
 - Skills and employment support.
 - Housing and strategic planning.
 - Economic development and regeneration.
 - Environment and climate change.
 - Health, wellbeing and public service reform.
 - Public safety.

Local Government Re-organisation

- 3.9 As a preparatory step to establishing Strategic Authorities, the Government is pushing forward a programme of local government re-organisation under which all remaining areas with two tier Councils will be expected to move to a unitary model. This will affect the remaining "shire" counties covering 21 two-tier areas.
- 3.10 As referred to in paragraph 2.4, Worcestershire County Council was not successful in requesting a delay to its elections. Accordingly, it is one of the 15 County areas which has been given until November 2025 by the government to present its proposals for re-organisation. Members are

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referred to the timetable at Appendix 1. For the immediate future the most important upcoming dates are as follows: -

- **21st March 2025 – Deadline for Interim Plan to be sent to the MHCLG**
- **28th November 2025 - Deadline for final proposals for re-organisation to be sent to MHCLG**

3.11 As set out in paragraph 2.7, the expectation is that one interim plan will be jointly submitted by all the councils in the area. This is made very clear as can be seen from the following quotes.

3.11.1 The White Paper states “All levels of local government have a part to play in bringing improved structures to their area through re-organisation, including by sharing information and working proactively to enable robust and sustainable options to be developed and considered. We expect all Councils in an area to work together to develop unitary proposals that are in the best interests of all councils in an area to work with us to bring about these changes as swiftly as possible”.

3.11.2 The Minister’s letter of 5th February states “We therefore expect local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively, including by sharing information to develop robust and sustainable unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area to which this invitation is issued, rather than developing competing proposals. This will mean making every effort to work together to develop and jointly submit one proposal for unitary local government across the whole of your area.”

3.12 The government acknowledges that at this stage plans may still be in the early phases of taking shape. As set out in Appendix 3, the interim plan should address the following issues: -

- Any barriers or challenges where government support is needed
- Options for a unitary structure
- Costs of a unitary structure
- Councillor numbers and electoral arrangements
- Views on how new structures would support devolution
- Plans for local engagement
- Preparatory costs
- Plans for joint working with other authorities in the area

Options for unitary structures

3.13 As already noted, the Minister’s letter at Appendix 2 includes a statutory invitation under section 2 of the Local Government and Public

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Involvement in Health Act 2007 for proposals to be submitted by principal councils in the county of Worcestershire for a single tier of local government. A proposal could include: -

- A single unitary council for the whole of Worcestershire.
- Two or more unitary councils for Worcestershire.
- A single tier proposal involving areas neighbouring Worcestershire.

3.14 In relation to the third option above (also known as a Type C proposal) the 2007 Act states that such a proposal can be made with a “relevant adjoining area”. This is defined as an area that “must adjoin the county concerned and is currently a county in England, a district in England or two or more such counties or districts”.

3.15 Based on this definition, then technically a unitary model for Worcestershire could be considered to include any of the following county areas; Herefordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Staffordshire. Officers are of the view that the 2007 Act would preclude a cross boundary arrangement with a metropolitan unitary authority. However, this is not entirely clear from wording in the White Paper which refers to re-organisation being available for: -

“those unitary councils where there is evidence of failure or where their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality services for their residents”.

3.16 The above points have been considered by the Worcestershire Leaders Board and whilst there is a third option of a Type C proposal, albeit that the exact details are unclear, the view of the Leaders is not to pursue a cross border option. This therefore leaves the two remaining options of a single unitary authority for the whole of Worcestershire model or two or more unitary authorities for Worcestershire.

3.17 The guidance from the secretary of state at Appendix 3 sets out a suite of considerations which authorities should take into account when formulating proposals. Of particular note is the guidance in section 2 which states that new councils should aim for a population figure of 500,000 or more. The guidance further states that “there may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal”. Details of the population figures for Worcestershire and adjoining areas can be found at Appendix 4.

Timetable for implementation of new arrangements

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- 3.18 The additional information provided by officials at MHCLG has set out that the proposed commencement date for any new unitary structure or structures in Worcestershire would be April 2028. Following submission of final proposals in November 2025, there would be a period of consultation from January to April 2026. Between May and August 2026 a government decision would be made and the enabling legislation laid before Parliament. Elections to the new style authority(ies) would take place in May 2027 which is referred to as “Shadow Authority(ies)”. In April 2028 the Shadow Authority(ies) would take over as the unitary authority(ies) for Worcestershire.
- 3.19 Based on the examples of previous two tier districts which have changed to a unitary structure there are different options as to the transition arrangements and the timing of elections for the new authority(ies) and the cessation of the original councils. In some examples the County Council has continued to operate as the Shadow Council for a further twelve months up to the implementation date with an increased number of members to reflect the eventual make up of the new unitary structure. Another model is for the County Council to be abolished and for the Shadow Council to be made up of all the County and District Councillors in the area with elections to the new unitary structure taking place after the abolition of the County Council and the District Councils. There are financial implications arising from the procedure for the Shadow Authority in terms of the levels of member allowance payable and this is set out in more detail in the Interim Plan.

Proposals in the Worcestershire Interim Plan for re-organisation

- 3.20 Members are referred to the full details set out in the Interim Plan at Appendix 5.
- 3.21 With regard to timing, it is proposed in the Interim Plan that a unitary structure be introduced across Worcestershire with effect from 01 April 2028. In respect of size and boundaries the Interim Plan identifies only two options as follows: -

Option A: A unitary council for the whole county with an estimated population of 614,000; or

Option B: Two unitary councils, one made up of Malvern Hills, Worcester City and Wychavon (population 323,000) and the other made up of Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre Forest (population 291,000).

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3.22 With regard to electoral arrangements, the county division boundaries have only recently been reviewed by the Boundary Commission. The Interim Plan suggests that the existing boundaries could continue to be used for a unitary structure by doubling the number of councillors per division. As none of the divisions crosses any District boundary this approach would be workable for either a single unitary council or two unitary councils and would result in the following size councils: -

Option A – single unitary – 114 councillors.

Option B - 60 members in the Southern unitary council and 54 members in the Northern unitary council.

3.23 The Interim Plan identifies a clash in May 2027 between proposed elections for the new unitary structure and the district council elections which are due to take place. It is therefore being recommended to government that the 2027 district council elections should be cancelled and the term of office of those councillors that was due to end in May 2027 be extended to May 2028. Officers are not aware of any implications for the Borough elections due to take place in May 2026 and based on the current information these would be expected to go ahead as planned.

3.24 As noted in paragraph 3.17 the government has identified that exceptions to the guidance on population of 500,000 may arise in certain scenarios. If this option were to be adopted for the final proposals it would be necessary to set out a well argued rationale to justify the lower population numbers.

3.25 Whilst the population numbers for a two unitary model would be below the threshold of 500,000, there are strong arguments that a proposal of two unitary councils would build on the existing and very well established models of partnership working in both the North and South of the County.

3.26 This is not an exhaustive list but examples of current shared working arrangements include: -

- Shared Services in operation between Bromsgrove and Redditch Councils since 2012 resulting in services currently being delivered jointly across both council areas by one team of staff.
- Shared Services for North Worcester Water Management and Building Control operated jointly by Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre Forest Councils
- Shared Services (for some but not all service areas) of Wychavon District Council and Malvern Hills District Council since 2014.

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- Shared Revenues and Benefits Service for the Southern Districts

Achieving devolution in Worcestershire

- 3.27 Whilst the seven councils in Worcestershire have control over shaping proposals for a new unitary governance structure, the inclusion in those plans of any devolution will be dependent on the outcome of discussions with neighbouring authorities. There is a range of options for the footprint of a strategic authority. The government suggests a minimum population of 1.5 million and states that strategic authorities should cover sensible economic geographies with a particular focus on functional economic areas.
- 3.28 Worcestershire's neighbouring areas are listed at paragraph 3.15 and various combinations would be possible to make up a population of 1.5 million. Members are referred to the Council area populations at Appendix 4. A further factor to note is the government's desire as set out in the White Paper to achieve public sector boundary alignment for strategic authorities. If two unitary councils were established, it would be possible for them to be in different strategic authorities.
- 3.29 The interim plan includes a pledge that "Worcestershire's councils commit themselves to working with neighbouring and nearby county and district councils and unitary authorities to provide clarity about the footprint [of a mayoral combined authority] and timetable as part of the final proposals".
- 3.30 The interim plan further states that "There is a range of options for the footprint of a mayoral combined authority and it is recognised that under Option B, it is possible that the two councils could be in different mayoral combined authorities. Discussions with councils in neighbouring areas will be taken forward in order to identify a position that is supported not only in Worcestershire but also in other areas that would participate in a devolution structure".

Challenges and Risks

- 3.31 The changes needed to be implemented to move to a unitary structure or structures in Worcestershire and to be able to access greater devolution through belonging to a strategic authority are challenging and far reaching. The White Paper sets out what would be the most significant programme of local government re-organisation for two tier authorities in decades. There are a number of unknowns and challenges that have been identified in the preparation of this report as follows: -

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- 3.31.1 The ability of the 7 councils in Worcestershire to work collaboratively to agree a high level plan for the way forward and to expand that plan into detailed final proposals that meet the government's criteria. Achieving consensus across the whole County will be difficult where there are different opinions and different approaches in the mix. It is anticipated that all 7 councils will support the agreed Interim Plan at Appendix 5, although it should be noted that individual councils may still choose to send additional comments relating to their own council to the MCHLG before the 21st March deadline. In terms of agreeing a final proposal, it would be open to Councils to submit different plans and this raises the risk that working on different scenarios would create duplication of effort and potentially stretch the available resources.
- 3.31.2 There is limited time to proceed with the next stage of formulating final proposals as that work has to be completed by November 2025. There may be practical issues around making plans such as the ability to gather data in a timely way and the need for authorities to co-operate in sharing data.
- 3.31.3 It is not known at this stage what the contents of the English Devolution Bill will be and whether a mechanism for compelling the creation of unitary authorities will be introduced for any councils who are unable to formulate acceptable plans in the current timescales.
- 3.31.4 A further unknown is the government position on achieving coterminous boundaries between new local government structures and the existing boundaries of other public authorities such as the police, the fire service and health authorities. The White Paper implies that the government would wish to see an alignment of the geographical boundaries of public authorities but there is little detail on this element.
- 3.31.5 There is a government expectation of public engagement taking place to inform the new unitary structures but there is limited time available to achieve this.
- 3.31.6 Plans to access additional devolution benefits would be contingent on the new unitary structure or structures forming part of a larger regional footprint as a member of a combined authority. Given the very short timetable for submitting final proposals, it will be a challenge at the same time to twin track this with discussions with authorities outside Worcestershire regarding formation of a combined authority. If such plans cannot be formulated, then accessing devolution benefits will be delayed.

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- 3.31.7 In light of the scale of change that will be needed to move to a unitary system, it is inevitable that this is going to give rise to uncertainty. This could be stressful for staff employed by the Council. Equally it could place strain on working relationships with other partners and colleagues from other authorities where services are delivered jointly or under shared services arrangements. These issues will have to be managed carefully as good working relationships will be essential to implementing the final proposals once they are known.
- 3.31.8 There is a risk that the focus needed by staff to formulate and implement the alternative unitary structure may detract from the ongoing delivery of day to day services for local residents. The impending changes may also make contract renewal and procurement more difficult and slow down or impede progress on projects that are currently being worked on.
- 3.31.9 There may be wider economic implications for Worcestershire as a whole while businesses/investors wait to see what changes will be introduced.

Next Steps

- 3.32 Following submission of the Council's interim response, further detailed analysis of the merits of either a County wide model or a two unitary model will have to be explored. This will have to address the financial feasibility of both options together with a wide range of other issues including electoral arrangements, future funding implications and service delivery of both district and county functions. The government will be expecting final submissions to be well researched and supported by evidence based on the criteria set out in the guidance (Appendix 3).
- 3.33 Worcestershire County Council has commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers ("PwC") to advise them on the likely costs and savings associated with the two models being considered. An initial assessment has been produced but further work needs to be done to fully understand the assumptions that were used for the modelling. At this stage the Section 151 officer is waiting for further information in relation to the PwC model to be shared by the County Council and until more data is forthcoming it will not be possible to validate the assumptions in the PwC model. There may be the requirement for the Council to commission additional expertise to undertake more detailed work on option appraisal.
- 3.34 Whilst at this stage the collaborative working through the Leaders Board has led to the production of a single draft interim plan, as individual councils proceed to explore the two Options it is inevitable that contra

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views on the way forward are likely to arise. This highlights the need for the resources to be available to fully explore the merits of both Options.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The setting up of any new Local Government structure will have associated costs relating to:
- The initial evaluation of options.
 - The establishment of the agreed final Option and associated shadow arrangements.
 - Redundancy costs.
 - Costs of moving to single systems and processes from multiple Councils in any final solution.
- 4.2 The Government is not offering any funding for this process and so it is expected that the costs of moving to any new structure will be funded from the existing Councils and/or operational savings going forward. For either option proposed, it would be expected that there would be ongoing operational savings however, the magnitude of those savings and final costs will depend on which option is taken forward.
- 4.3 There is significant work involved in undertaking these financial evaluations and the outcomes will then need including with operational and other delivery requirements of the different options being evaluated to come to a final solution. The Council is scoping out and commissioning the initial remit for this.
- 4.4 It should be remembered that services being delivered by all Councils up to vesting day must continue.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 As set out in the main body of the report, the existing legislation which enables local government reorganisations to be implemented is the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This is the legislation which has been used previously to create county unitary authorities. It is not clear whether the government intends to add to these existing powers regarding reorganisation when it brings forward legislation for reorganisation and devolution. New legislation will be needed to implement other parts of the White Paper including the creation of Strategic Authorities and other aspects of devolution.
- 5.2 In this regard, the government has stated that it is committed to bringing forward “the English Devolution Bill “in the first session (of Parliament)

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subject to parliamentary time". No further details of this bill are available at this time.

- 5.3 Whilst government has requested that an Interim Plan be submitted to MHCLG by 21st March, it should be noted that the response is not binding upon the Council. Further work will have to be carried out to formulate more detailed proposals and these will be presented to Members nearer the final submission deadline of 28th November 2025. Neighbouring authorities are strongly encouraged to work together to present joint plans but it is not a legal requirement that the same final plan be submitted by all Councils.
- 5.4 As set out in paragraphs 3.13 to 3.16, whilst a third option for re-organisation by combining with other authorities adjoining Worcestershire's boundaries is possible under the 2007 Act, there is uncertainty as to how this would operate in practice given comments in the White Paper.
- 5.5 The Secretary of State has passed a series of generic regulations applicable to all re-organisations, under section 14 of the 2007 Act. These cover the common practical issues that arise when implementing a re-organisation including finance requirements, the transfer of assets and employees and other transitional arrangements and can be listed as follows: -
- The Local Government (Structural Changes) (Transitional Arrangements) (No.2) Regulations 2008/2867 (Transition Regulations).
 - Local Government (Structural Changes) (Transfer of Functions, Property, Rights and Liabilities) Regulations 2008/2176 (2008 Regulations).
 - Local Government (Structural and Boundary Changes) (Staffing) Regulations 2008 (Employment Regulations).
 - Local Government (Structural Changes) (Finance) Regulations 2008/3022 (Finance Regulations)
- 5.6 When a proposal for a new unitary council has been agreed, the Secretary of State will issue specific regulations and orders under section 7 of the 2007 Act to create local arrangements to ensure a smooth implementation. These local regulations will cover a number of matters including: -

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- Effective dates
- Establishment of a shadow authority and its membership
- Governance arrangements for shadow authority
- Duty to produce an implementation plan
- Duty of all councils to co-operate
- Arrangements for first elections
- Treatment of any specific assets or liabilities

6. OTHER - IMPLICATIONS

Relevant Council Priority

- 6.1 Any change to a new Unitary authority to either option will have a potential impact on the future of the current Redditch Borough Council priorities.

Climate Change Implications

- 6.2 There are no specific climate change implications.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 6.3 There are no specific equalities and diversity implications.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 See previous section on “Challenges and Risks” at paragraph 3.31.

8. APPENDICES and BACKGROUND PAPERS

Appendices

Appendix 1 Chronology and Key Dates

Appendix 2 Letter from Jim McMahon MP to the Leaders of two-tier councils in Worcestershire – dated 5th February 2025 including Annex A - Invitation for Proposals for a Single Tier of Local Government.

Appendix 3 Guidance from the Secretary of State for proposals for unitary local government

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Appendix 4 Table of population figures

Appendix 5 Interim Plan for local government reorganisation in Worcestershire.

Background Papers

English Devolution White Paper [English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

Letter to all two-tier councils from Jim McMahon MP dated 16th December 2024

APPENDIX 1**Key dates for Local Government Re-organisation Process**

16th December 2024	White Paper titled English Devolution White Paper issued BY Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
8 th January 2025	Letter sent by Worcestershire County Council to Minister of State requesting postponement of 2025 elections
5 th February 2025	Letter from Minister of State to the Leaders of two-tier councils in Worcestershire including Annex A - Invitation for Proposals for a Single Tier of Local Government and Guidance for proposals
12 th March 2025	Extra Ordinary Council meeting to consider Interim Response
21 st March 2025	Deadline for Interim response to be sent to the MHCLG
1 st May 2025	Worcestershire County Council elections going ahead
28 th November 2025	Deadline for final proposals for re-organisation to be sent to MHCLG
January to April 2026	Government consultation on proposals submitted
May 2026	Local elections scheduled to take place in Redditch and Worcester City Council
May to August 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government decision on proposal • Re-organisation legislation prepared and laid before Parliament
May 2027	District Council Elections due to take place
May 2027	Elections to new shadow unitary authority or authorities
May to December 2027	Any transitional legislation prepared and laid before Parliament
01 April 2028	Go live date for new unitary authority (authorities)

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Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Jim McMahon OBE MP

*Minister of State for Local Government and
English Devolution*
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Your reference:

Our reference:

To: Leaders of two-tier councils in
Worcestershire

Bromsgrove District Council
Malvern Hills District Council
Redditch Borough Council
Worcester City Council
Worcestershire County Council
Wychavon District Council
Wyre Forest District Council

5 February 2025

Dear Leaders

This Government has been clear on our vision for simpler, more sustainable, local government structures, alongside a transfer of power out of Westminster through devolution. We know that councils of all political stripes are in crisis after a decade of decline and instability. Indeed, a record number of councils asked the government for support this year to help them set their budgets.

This new government will not waste this opportunity to build empowered, simplified, resilient and sustainable local government for your area that will increase value for money for council taxpayers. Local leaders are central to our mission to deliver change for hard-working people in every corner of the country through our Plan for Change, and our councils are doing everything they can to stay afloat and provide for their communities day in, day out. The Government will work closely with you to deliver these aims to the most ambitious timeline.

I am writing to you now to formally invite you to work with other council leaders in your area to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation, and to set out further detail on the criteria, guidance for the development of proposals, and the timeline for this process. A formal invitation with guidance for the development of your proposals is attached at Annex A. This invitation sets out the criteria against which proposals will be assessed.

Developing proposals for reorganisation

We expect there to be different views on the best structures for an area, and indeed there may be merits to a variety of approaches. Nevertheless, it is not in council taxpayers' interest to devote public funds and your valuable time and effort into the development of multiple proposals which unnecessarily fragment services, compete against one another, require lengthy implementation periods or which do not sufficiently address local interests and identities.

The public will rightly expect us to deliver on our shared responsibility to design and implement the best local government structures for efficient and high-quality public service delivery. We therefore expect local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively, including by sharing information, to develop robust and sustainable unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area to which this invitation is issued, rather than developing competing proposals.

This will mean making every effort to work together to develop and jointly submit one proposal for unitary local government across the whole of your area. The proposal that is developed for the whole of your area may be for one or more new unitary councils and should be complementary to devolution plans. It is open to you to explore options with neighbouring councils in addition to those included in this invitation, particularly where this helps those councils to address concerns about their sustainability or limitations arising from their size or boundaries or where you are working together across a wider geography within a strategic authority.

I understand there will be some cases when it is not possible for all councils in an area to jointly develop and submit a proposal, despite their best efforts. This will not be a barrier to progress, and the Government will consider any suitable proposals submitted by the relevant local authorities.

Supporting places through change

It is essential that councils continue to deliver their business-as-usual services and duties, which remain unchanged until reorganisation is complete. This includes progress towards the Government's ambition of universal coverage of up-to-date local plans as quickly as possible. To support with capacity, I intend to provide some funds for preparing to take forward any proposal, and I will share further information later in the process.

Considering the efficiencies that are possible through reorganisation, we expect that areas will be able to meet transition costs over time from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.

The default position is that assets and liabilities remain locally managed by councils, but we acknowledge that there are exceptional circumstances where there has been failure linked to capital practices. Where that is the case, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation, and Commissioners should be engaged in these discussions. We will continue to discuss the approach that is proposed with the area.

I welcome the partnership approach that is being taken across the sector to respond to the ambitious plans set out in the White Paper. My department will continue to work closely with the Local Government Association (LGA), the District Councils Network, the County Councils Network and other local government partners to plan how best to support councils through this process. We envisage that practical support will be needed to understand and address the key thematic issues that will arise through reorganisation, including managing service impacts and opportunities for the workforce, digital and IT systems, and leadership support.

Timelines and next steps for interim plans and full proposals

We ask for an interim plan to be submitted on or before 21 March 2025, in line with the guidance set out in the attached Annex. My officials will provide feedback on your plan to help support you to develop final proposals.

I will expect any full proposal to be submitted **by 28 November**. If I decide to implement any proposal, and the necessary legislation is agreed by Parliament, we will work with you to move to elections to new 'shadow' unitary councils as soon as possible as is the usual arrangement in the process of local government reorganisation.

Following submission, I will consider any and all proposals carefully before taking decisions on how to proceed. My officials are available throughout to discuss how your reorganisation and devolution aspirations might work together and what support you think you might need to proceed.

This is a once in a generation opportunity to work together to put local government in your area on a more sustainable footing, creating simpler structures for your area that will deliver the services that local people and businesses need and deserve. As set out in the White Paper, my commitment is that clear leadership locally will be met with an active partner nationally.

I am copying this letter to council Chief Executives. I am also copying this letter to local Members of Parliament and to the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Yours sincerely,

JIM MCMAHON OBE MP
Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution

Annex A

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN HEALTH ACT 2007**INVITATION FOR PROPOSALS FOR A SINGLE TIER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in exercise of his powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'), hereby invites any principal authority in the area of the county of Worcestershire, to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government.

This may be one of the following types of proposal as set out in the 2007 Act:

- Type A – a single tier of local authority covering the whole of the county concerned
- Type B – a single tier of local authority covering an area that is currently a district, or two or more districts
- Type C – a single tier of local authority covering the whole of the county concerned, or one or more districts in the county; and one or more relevant adjoining areas
- Combined proposal – a proposal that consists of two or more Type B proposals, two or more Type C proposals, or one or more Type B proposals and one or more Type C proposals.

Proposals must be submitted in accordance with paragraphs 1 to 3:

1. Any proposal must be made by **28 November 2025**.
2. In responding to this invitation an authority must have regard to the guidance from the Secretary of State set out in the Schedule to this invitation, and to any further guidance on responding to this invitation received from the Secretary of State.
3. An authority responding to this invitation may either make its own proposal or make a proposal jointly with any of the other authorities invited to respond.

Signed on behalf of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

F KIRWAN

A senior civil servant in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

5 February 2025

SCHEDULE

Guidance from the Secretary of State for proposals for unitary local government.

Criteria for unitary local government

- 1. A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.**
 - a) Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area.
 - b) Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.
 - c) Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement.
 - d) Proposals should describe clearly the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area, and explain how, if implemented, these are expected to achieve the outcomes described.

- 2. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.**
 - a) As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.
 - b) There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.
 - c) Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best possible value for their money.
 - d) Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.
 - e) For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.
 - f) In general, as with previous restructures, there is no proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation. For areas where there are exceptional circumstances where there has been failure linked to capital practices, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation.

3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.

- a) Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery, and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.
- b) Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.
- c) Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety.

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.

- a) It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal.
- b) Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.
- c) Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.

5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.

- a) Proposals will need to consider and set out for areas where there is already a Combined Authority (CA) or a Combined County Authority (CCA) established or a decision has been taken by Government to work with the area to establish one, how that institution and its governance arrangements will need to change to continue to function effectively; and set out clearly (where applicable) whether this proposal is supported by the CA/CCA /Mayor.
- b) Where no CA or CCA is already established or agreed then the proposal should set out how it will help unlock devolution.
- c) Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities.

6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

- a) Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged.
- b) Where there are already arrangements in place it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement.

Developing proposals for unitary local government

The following matters should be taken into account in formulating a proposal:

Boundary Changes

- a) Existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for your proposals, but where there is a strong justification more complex boundary changes will be considered.
- b) There will need to be a strong public services and financial sustainability related justification for any proposals that involve boundary changes, or that affect wider public services, such as fire and rescue authorities, due to the likely additional costs and complexities of implementation.

Engagement and consultation on reorganisation

- a) We expect local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively, including by sharing information, to develop robust and sustainable unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area to which this invitation is issued, rather than developing competing proposals.
- b) For those areas where Commissioners have been appointed by the Secretary of State as part of the Best Value Intervention, their input will be important in the development of robust unitary proposals.
- c) We also expect local leaders to engage their Members of Parliament, and to ensure there is wide engagement with local partners and stakeholders, residents, workforce and their representatives, and businesses on a proposal.
- d) The engagement that is undertaken should both inform the development of robust proposals and should also build a shared understanding of the improvements you expect to deliver through reorganisation.
- e) The views of other public sector providers will be crucial to understanding the best way to structure local government in your area. This will include the relevant Mayor (if you already have one), Integrated Care Board, Police (Fire) and Crime Commissioner, Fire and Rescue Authority, local Higher Education and Further Education providers, National Park Authorities, and the voluntary and third sector.
- f) Once a proposal has been submitted it will be for the Government to decide on taking a proposal forward and to consult as required by statute. This will be a completely separate process to any consultation undertaken on mayoral devolution in an area, which will be undertaken in some areas early this year, in parallel with this invitation.

Interim plans

An interim plan should be provided to Government on or before **21 March 2025**. This should set out your progress on developing proposals in line with the criteria and guidance. The level of detail that is possible at this stage may vary from place to place but the expectation is that one interim plan is jointly submitted by all councils in the area. It may be the case that the interim plan describes more than one potential proposal for your area, if there is more than one option under consideration. The interim plan should:

- a) identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful.
- b) identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities.
- c) include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for future service transformation opportunities.
- d) include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance.
- e) include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions.
- f) include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals.
- g) set out indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area.
- h) set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forward and to help balance the decisions needed now to maintain service delivery and ensure value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area.

Council Area Populations

Area	Population (2023 mid-year estimate)
Worcestershire	0.614m
Herefordshire	0.190m
Shropshire (including Telford and Wrekin)	0.515m
West Mercia (total of the above)	1.319m
Warwickshire	0.618m
Gloucestershire	0.659m
North Worcestershire (Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre Forest)	0.291m
South Worcestershire (Malvern Hills, Worcester and Wychavon).	0.323m

Source: Officer for National Statistics

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APPENDIX 5 Interim plan for local government reorganisation in Worcestershire

1 Worcestershire: an introduction

Worcestershire is one of the historic counties of England formed in the Anglo-Saxon period. It is located in the West Midlands and is bounded to the north by the southern tip of the county of Staffordshire as well as the metropolitan districts of Dudley, Birmingham and Solihull; to the east by the county of Warwickshire; to the south by the county of Gloucestershire; and to the west by the unitary councils of Herefordshire and Shropshire.

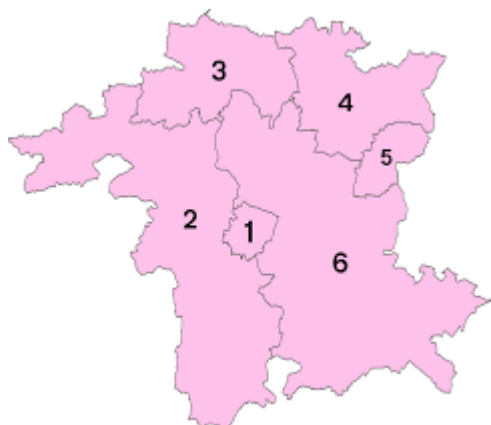
The boundaries of Worcestershire have changed many times over the centuries, with areas being added to and taken from the county, particularly areas to the north that now form part of Dudley. From 1974 to 1998, the counties of Hereford and Worcester were formed into a single county council which was not a success and ultimately led to the creation of the unitary Herefordshire council.

Worcestershire falls within the area of West Mercia Police, which also serves Herefordshire, Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin. Fire and rescue services are delivered under the oversight of the Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority. The Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board covers the area of the two counties.

The map shows the ceremonial counties that surround Worcestershire.



There are six districts in the county of Worcestershire, all of which have been on their present boundaries since 1974 apart from changes made to the boundaries of Malvern Hills district when Herefordshire was created as a unitary council.



Key to map of districts

1 Worcester; 2 Malvern Hills; 3 Wyre Forest; 4 Bromsgrove; 5 Redditch; 6 Wychavon

The table shows the population of the districts and the county area using ONS's 2023 mid year estimates and ONS's population projections for 2043 (ONS, 2018-based projections, 24 May 2020). 2021-based projections will be published in May 2025.

	Mid year estimate, 2023	Projection, 2043
Bromsgrove	100,679	117,014
Redditch	87,059	86,293
Wyre Forest	103,253	112,713
<i>Sub-total: North Worcestershire</i>	<i>290,991</i>	<i>316,020</i>
Malvern Hills	81,822	92,799
Worcester	105,143	106,719
Wychavon	136,229	163,042
<i>Sub-total: South Worcestershire</i>	<i>323,194</i>	<i>362,560</i>
Worcestershire	614,185	678,580

2 Worcestershire's approach to reorganisation

The seven principal councils in Worcestershire have worked positively together since the current local government structure came into effect in 1998. Across that period, there has not been a shared appetite across the councils for further reorganisation. The seven councils make clear that they have not sought reorganisation at this time.

However, the Government's policy set out in the English Devolution White Paper makes clear that the structure which continues to work successfully in Worcestershire must be replaced with a unitary structure. (In this plan, "unitary

structure” means a local government structure that involves only unitary principal authorities. The singular “structure” does not imply any view about the number of unitary authorities.) It is in that context that the seven principal councils of Worcestershire expect reorganisation on 1 April 2028 as well as the county’s participation in devolution. It is recognised that a unitary structure would represent a simplification and be clearer for residents, businesses etc. as it would remove the transactional boundary between county and district functions. They would welcome feedback from the Government on this interim plan.

3 Options for a unitary structure

The councils believe that a unitary structure would be implemented across Worcestershire with effect from 1 April 2028, with elections being held in May 2027. Worcestershire councils and the Government should provide this clarity on the timetable, as it is essential in order to provide certainty for staff, councillors, partners and others.

Any proposal submitted will address the full range of the Government’s criteria set out in the statutory guidance issued on 5 February. For the interim plan, it has not been possible in the time available to undertake detailed assessment against all criteria.

The seven councils support reorganisation being within the boundaries of the county of Worcestershire only and using whole districts as building blocks.

Based on formal resolutions agreed by several councils, there are only two options for a unitary structure in respect of size and boundaries:

- (a) a unitary council for the whole county of Worcestershire, population 614k (2023 mid-year estimate). This accords with the statutory guidance that “As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more”;
- (b) two unitary councils in Worcestershire, one comprising the districts of Malvern Hills, Worcester and Wychavon (population 323k) and the other comprising the districts of Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre Forest (population 291k). This accords with the statutory guidance that “there may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution”.

The table summarises the formal position of each of the seven councils (**drafting note: to be updated in light of outcome of meetings being held before 21 March**)

The formal position of each of the seven councils at the time of submission of the interim plan	
Worcester	Resolution of 11 February: “preferred option is for a South Worcestershire unitary council...builds on the strength of our partnerships with the other South Worcestershire district councils and our

	strategic planning policy, the South Worcestershire Development Plan”.
Malvern Hills	Resolution of 25 February: “a two unitary council option for Worcestershire with one council for South Worcestershire comprising the districts of Malvern Hills, Worcester City and Wychavon is likely to provide the better solution.... so this is currently our first preference”.
Wyre Forest	Resolution of 26 February: “the best deal for Wyre Forest residents is a “One Worcestershire” approach of a Worcestershire unitary council It considers that a North Worcestershire unitary and South Worcestershire unitary would not meet the Government’s own policy agenda”
Wychavon	Resolution of 26 February: “their preferred view regarding local government reorganisation and devolution at the present stage was that both the One Worcestershire model and the North (Bromsgrove, Redditch, Wyre Forest) / South (Malvern Hills, Worcester City and Wychavon) model should be explored”.
Bromsgrove	<i>TBC Want to see the evidence in support of the two options, and wish to look at both options</i> <precise wording to follow resolution of Council on 12 March>
Redditch	<i>TBC Prepared to look at and explore both options but preference is for two unitary councils</i> <precise wording to follow resolution of Council on 17 March>
Worcestershire	<i>Worcestershire County Council only supports one option, a single Unitary Authority covering the whole county as detailed in the PWC report that will</i>

	<p><i>also be submitted to government in response to the interim plan</i> <precise wording to follow resolution by Cabinet on 20 March></p>
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All councils accept that the options set out above are the only two options, but they all recognise that views differ on the level to which both options meet the full range of the Government's criteria.

At present, there is not unanimity among the seven principal councils. More work will be done to identify which structure will feature in the proposal submitted by 28 November, with a view to reaching agreement upon it. However, all councils recognise that ultimately there might be competing proposals.

4 Costs of a unitary structure

Work is being done on the costs and savings associated with moving to a unitary structure, including an initial assessment that has been commissioned by the county council from PwC. At this stage, there has not been time for PwC's assumptions to be fully tested by all councils. Further work will be done on costs and savings in preparing final proposals.

No work has yet been done on planning for future service transformation opportunities. In Worcestershire, some district services are already organised on a basis that is either county-wide, aligned with option (b) or on a shared service basis/shared management arrangements across districts and borough councils. In that respect, there is more limited scope for service transformation than exists in some other county areas where districts each continue to make their own arrangements.

5 Devolution

The seven principal councils in Worcestershire wish to realise the benefits of devolution for the county's communities, residents and businesses. Initial discussions have been held between some Worcestershire councils and councils in neighbouring areas.

Ultimately the footprint and timing of the devolution process will involve decisions with neighbouring areas about what area represents a sensible economic geography to support and drive growth. Worcestershire's councils commit themselves to working with neighbouring and nearby county and district councils and unitary authorities to provide clarity about the footprint and timetable as part of final proposals.

The earliest timetable would see elections for a mayor or mayors in May 2027, with the unitary council or councils being constituent members of a mayoral combined authority from that date. Later timetables are possible such as mayoral elections in May 2028.

Whether there are one or two unitary councils in Worcestershire, their population would be comparable to or larger than other unitary authorities that exist in neighbouring areas; and they would be unlikely to be significantly smaller than any new unitary authorities that are created in neighbouring areas that have county and district councils. It would therefore be easy to incorporate one or two councils within a mayoral combined authority footprint in a way that did not lead to unwieldy governance arrangements.

There is a range of options for the footprint of a mayoral combined authority. It is recognised that, under option (b), it is possible that the two councils could be in different mayoral combined authorities. Discussions with councils in neighbouring areas will be taken forward by all seven councils in order to identify a position that is supported not only in Worcestershire but also in the other areas that would participate in a devolution structure.

In advance of Worcestershire councils being able to produce a proposal for reorganisation that is aligned with devolution, it will be essential that the Government sets out a clear and unequivocal position on whether it is prepared to see the areas of police forces, fire and rescue services and integrated care boards split. If the answer to any or each of those is “no”, it has a fundamental effect on the footprints that are possible, given the Government’s policy statements about alignment.

6 Electoral arrangements

The electoral arrangements for the county council have recently been reviewed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and will be used for the elections on 1 May 2025.

To avoid repeating work done only recently by the Commission, they could continue to be used without any additional effort for a unitary structure. There is no county electoral division in the Worcestershire (Electoral Changes) Order 2024 that crosses a district boundary. The divisions could therefore easily be used for two unitary councils in option (b), and they should be used in the event of a single unitary council.

One option could be to double the number of councillors in each division, a simple solution that would provide councils of the following sizes:

Option (a) – a unitary council of 114 members;

Option (b) – a unitary council for southern Worcestershire of 60 members and a unitary council for northern Worcestershire of 54 members.

This would represent a reduction of 143 councillors (-56%) compared to the current structure of 257 councillors. Assuming that the basic allowance for a unitary councillor would be broadly similar to the basic allowance of c£12k paid in nearby unitaries such as Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin, it would provide an estimated saving of about £300k a year.

Holding elections to the unitary structure in May 2027 results in extra cost, which constitutes a preparatory cost for which we seek funding. District councils have

whole council elections in May 2027 except Redditch (one third of councillors to be elected) and Worcester (May 2028). The district council elections in May 2027 should be cancelled and the term of office of district councillors that is due to end then should be extended to 31 March 2028. In line with arrangements for unitary councils elsewhere, elections to the new structure should be held every four years from 2027 i.e. 2031, 2035 etc.

Adopting the proposed arrangements for the first elections to the unitary structure would not preclude a subsequent review by the Boundary Commission, for example to reduce councillor numbers further or to create single member divisions.

If mayoral elections were held in May 2027, at the same time as elections to the unitary structure, we advocate a different timetable for subsequent mayoral elections. Holding elections in different years is preferable as it ensures that there is a clear, separate mandate for a mayor and for unitary councillors. If the first mayoral elections were held in 2027 at the same time as elections to the unitary structure, this separation could be achieved by the first term of office for a mayor being either three or five years, so that subsequent mayoral elections would be in 2030 or 2032. We will address this issue as appropriate in discussions with neighbouring areas about devolution.

7 Engagement

The Ministerial letter of 5 February has provided insufficient time for engagement with the public, businesses, staff or other stakeholders, although there have been informal conversations with some neighbouring councils and stakeholders in Worcestershire.

The councils will undertake wide engagement before submitting a proposal and will set out the results as part of the proposal.

8 Preparatory costs

The councils are prepared to undertake engagement work with public and businesses; to take other steps to prepare proposals including the work already commissioned from PwC; and to set up an implementation team involving staff from all councils. Worcestershire councils seek Government funding to cover these preparatory costs, as they are a direct consequence of Government policy as set out in the devolution white paper. They are a new burden, representing additional work when there are no offsetting savings to fund them: the Government's decision not to postpone the May 2025 elections means that an opportunity for savings has been lost.

The preparatory costs that can be identified or estimated at present are set out in the table. **These are early estimates and may not include all preparatory costs that will arise. Worcestershire councils reserve the right to submit updated estimates as the process goes forward.**

Opportunity cost of existing staff time in producing interim plan and proposals: not charged	Zero
PwC business case, March 2025	Up to £70k
Policy and consultancy support for preparation of proposals Assumption: preparation of proposals subsumes public engagement to underpin proposals (including weighted opinion survey that produces reliable indications from each district area). Based on £500k for each potential proposal.	£500k-£1.0m
Additional cost of unitary elections in Worcester in May 2027 (plus minor additional costs in Redditch) Elections in Worcester would be a year earlier than normal but the saving from not holding those elections will not be available to fund costs in 2027-28.	£100k-£120k
Additional basic allowances for members, 11 months, May 2027 to March 2028 The costs vary depending on the structural arrangements in the shadow period, but the higher end of the range assumes elections will be held to a unitary structure in May 2027. Special responsibility allowances for shadow period to be estimated	£275k-£565k (basic allowances only)
Statutory officers for shadow period Costs arise if there is one shadow council that is not the present county council or there are two shadow councils	Zero-£500k
Implementation team/programme management office, miscellaneous professional and consultancy support e.g. valuations of properties, legal advice, HR support in period to March 2028	To be identified as part of final proposals
Minimum estimated total	£1m to £2.3m

9 Joint working on reorganisation and devolution

The seven principal councils in Worcestershire have a record of working together positively. The leaders in the guise of the Worcestershire Leaders' Board have confirmed the commitment of all councils to openness and collaboration, and have also supported the principle of a memorandum of understanding on collaboration, which is being drafted.

10 Barriers or challenges requiring Government action

Early written feedback and views from Government following submission of the interim plan, and deadline by which they will be provided.

Early written confirmation of the level of funding that will be made available for preparatory costs to submit proposals and to prepare for reorganisation, and which councils would receive the funding.

Early confirmation of the Government's policy position on splitting areas of police, fire and integrated care boards.

Confirmation of the Government's preferred date for devolution embracing Worcestershire, and the dates by which a footprint for devolution would need to be agreed with neighbouring areas in order to allow mayoral elections in May 2027 or in May 2028.

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