

MINUTES

Present:

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

Officers:

Claire Felton, John Leach, Guy Revans and Bob Watson

Democratic Services Officers:

Jess Bayley-Hill

28. WELCOME

The Mayor welcomed all those present to the meeting.

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Alan Mason, Rita Rogers and Monica Stringfellow.

30. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

31. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of Council held on Monday 30th June 2025 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Mayor.

32. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION REPORT - MUTUAL VENTURES**

The Leader presented the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Report which provided an overview of the outcomes of the options appraisal that had been carried out by Mutual Ventures.

The report and associated appendices considered two main options for LGR in Worcestershire:

- Option A: One unitary authority for the whole of Worcestershire.
- Option B: presented as options B1 and B2, considered the creation of two unitary authorities made up of North Worcestershire (covering Bromsgrove District, Redditch Borough and Wyre Forest District) and South Worcestershire (covering Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wychavon District).

Option B consisted of two variants:

- Option B1 provided for two unitary Councils to be established across Worcestershire; North Worcestershire and South Worcestershire. It involved the disaggregation and transferring of all statutory and non-statutory services, functions and the operating model from Worcestershire County Council to the new unitary Councils and the aggregation and transferring of all statutory and non-statutory services, functions and operating models from the district Councils to their respective new (north or south) unitary Councils.
- Option B2 provided two unitary Councils established across Worcestershire; North Worcestershire and South Worcestershire. It offered a shared service/hybrid model across both new unitary Councils, with specific services (i.e. adult social care, children's services, education, adult education and transport) jointly delivered and commissioned. All other services would be delivered and commissioned by each new unitary Council, including prevention and early help. The exact arrangement would be determined during the development of any future full LGR proposal.

By way of background, Members were reminded that on 5th February 2025 the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to all the Worcestershire authorities inviting the Council Leaders in the area to develop a proposal for single tier reorganisation in exercise of powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The timetable imposed by the Government required interim proposals to

be submitted by 21st March 2025 and final proposals by 28th November 2025.

At an extraordinary Council meeting held on 17th March 2025, Members had agreed an interim plan that covered two main options for unitarisation: a single unitary authority for the county of Worcestershire or, alternatively, two unitary authorities covering north and south Worcestershire.

At that extraordinary Council meeting, Members had agreed the interim plan for submission and to further explore the options that had been identified. On that basis, Redditch Borough Council, along with the Councils of Bromsgrove District, Worcester City, Malvern Hills District and Wychavon District, had agreed to commission consultants to carry out an options appraisal.

The company Mutual Ventures had secured the commission. Members were informed that the aim of Mutual Ventures was “to make public services better, more sustainable and more connected to communities”.

The Government had confirmed that there were six criteria that were due to be used to assess any LGR proposal. In summary, the six criteria required proposals to demonstrate:

1. The establishment of a single tier of local government.
2. That unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.
3. Prioritisation of the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
4. How Councils in the area had sought to work together in coming to a view that met local needs and was informed by local views.
5. The support of devolution arrangements.
6. How new unitary structures enabled stronger community engagement and delivered genuine opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment.

The approach taken in appraising each option had been to consider qualitative and quantitative information against the Government’s six LGR criteria. Members were informed that the qualitative information was acquired through 32 engagement sessions, a county wide public survey and staff surveys.

The design principles had been based on the outputs from the engagement sessions for what good might look like in terms of local government in Worcestershire in the future. In addition, feedback received in the public survey, entitled “Shape Worcestershire”, had

highlighted a preference for two authorities covering the north and south of the County. Similarly, this preference had been shared by staff employed by Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Council who had responded to an internal consultation exercise.

Within the report, a summary had been provided of each of the options in terms of their performance against the Government's six LGR criteria. This was further divided into 21 other elements as set out by the Minister in Annex A of his letter of 5th February 2025. As part of this section, consideration had been given to the probability, with scores of high, medium and low or unclear, of each option meeting the individual criteria.

In overview, Members were asked to note the following headlines:

- All options delivered a single tier of Local Government. Options A and B2 had a high probability of prioritising the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens. Option B2 also offered the dynamic of operating at size and scale for large services such as adults and children's services whilst being able to deliver place-based services at the locality level. Both options B1 and B2 offered a higher probability than Option A of being able to deliver to meet local needs as informed by local views.
- Option A could achieve significant savings but was believed to perform less well in respect of empowering local communities and meeting people's expectations/views in terms of what kind of local authority they wanted to have serving them and their local area.
- Whilst Option B1 with Option B2 offered a higher probability of providing stronger local community engagement/neighbourhood empowerment than Option A, it delivered the least efficiencies of all of the options and included the risks and costs of disaggregating adults' and children's services.
- Under Option B2, adults' and children's services were not disaggregated and place services remained focussed on localities and prevention. This option, whilst making more savings than Option B1, did not perform as well as Option A in relation to efficiencies but performed better than Option A in respect of the probability of empowering local communities and meeting people's expectations/views in terms of what kind of local authority they wanted to serve them and their local area.

After the report had been presented, Members discussed the content in detail and in doing so commented on the fact that Councils in two-tier areas across the country were subject to LGR and were all reviewing potential unitary authority arrangements that

could be implemented moving forward. Local authorities had discretion to assess what they believed would be the best unitary authority structures for their areas, subject to final proposals addressing the six criteria identified by the Government. However, ultimately the final decision in respect of this matter would be taken by the Government.

Members noted that the decisions that Councillors would take on this subject at both this stage and in November prior to a final submission to Government would be historic. It was noted that significant changes to local government such as these happened approximately every fifty years and would have profound implications for future generations.

Reference was made to the current operation of both the County Council and the District Councils in Worcestershire and questions were raised about whether Option A, involving a single unitary authority, would effectively involve the continuation of service delivery by an authority based on Worcestershire County Council. Concerns were raised about whether this would serve the interests of Redditch residents and Members commented that they believed that over the years the Borough had not always received fair treatment compared to other parts of Worcestershire. However, Members also noted that, on vesting day, both Worcestershire County Council and all of the District Councils, including Redditch Borough Council, would cease to exist. Any future unitary authority or authorities would be entirely separate from the existing local Councils.

Members discussed the feedback that had been received during the Shape Worcestershire public consultation exercise. In reflecting on this feedback, Members noted that a majority of residents in both the county and in the Borough of Redditch had favoured Option B: two unitary authorities, one for the north of the county and one for the south. Questions were raised about whether there had been sufficient clarity regarding the implications of each option to enable the public to provide informed responses and reference was made to the varying feedback that different Councillors had received from the public when discussing these options with local residents. However, Members also commented that the feedback received from the public in completed surveys needed to be taken on board when determining which option of LGR to take forward in Worcestershire.

During consideration of this item, reference was made to the financial savings arising from each of the options detailed in the report. Concerns were raised that Option B1 would result in limited financial savings. The financial savings arising from Option B2 were greater, but it was noted that these were not as significant as

the financial savings associated with Option A. On the one hand, some Members suggested that under these circumstances, Option A might be the only viable option to ensure financial sustainability and therefore the continuation of key local services moving forward. On the other hand, Members suggested that decisions could not just be taken on the basis of financial considerations and Members needed to also take on board the views of the public and the extent to which each option supported community engagement and empowerment. Furthermore, Members commented that all of the options would result in financial savings eventually, albeit over a longer period of time for Options B1 and B2 compared to Option A.

In considering the financial implications highlighted in the report for each option, concerns were raised about the extent to which the report had taken into account Worcestershire County Council's financial challenges. Members also commented that it was anticipated that Redditch would benefit from the Fairer Funding review of local government, due to the relatively high levels of deprivation in the Borough and questions were raised about whether this had been considered in relation to any of the options. In addition, Members commented that financial savings should only form one consideration when reviewing the Options available and it was noted that the Government had been clear that no criteria should be regarded as taking precedence.

The financial challenges facing local government in general were highlighted as part of the debate. Members commented that there had been underfunding of local government for decades under successive Governments which had impacted on the performance of local authorities. The point was made that, regardless of the final model of LGR approved by the Government for Worcestershire, local government would need to be provided with appropriate funding moving forward in order for the new unitary authorities introduced across the country to be financially sustainable.

The differences between Options B1 and B2 were discussed. Concerns were raised that Option B1 would result in the disaggregation of social services, which were used by a lot of residents living in the Borough. By contrast, the shared service arrangements under Option B2 would not result in the same challenges. Under these circumstances, many Members commented that they would prefer Option B2 to Option B1, although it was recognised that this choice was not available for consideration at the meeting.

The arrangements that would be in place should Option B2 be endorsed by the Council were subsequently considered. Members noted that a number of key services had been identified as ideal for sharing services under this model, including adult's and children's

social services as well as transport. The suggestion was made that many efficiencies could still be achieved under this model whilst the two unitary Councils would have a local focus on communities. The point was raised that many partner organisations, including in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), had already developed separate working arrangements for the north and south of the county. Members commented that two unitary authorities reflecting the same areas of separation would have natural alignments with these arrangements.

Consideration was given to the potential focus of a north Worcestershire unitary authority and concerns were raised that in the long-term this type of Council could be at risk of being subsumed into a Birmingham local authority or into the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). However, Members also noted that there were no plans to change the boundaries of Birmingham City Council nor was inclusion in the WMCA an option that could be explored.

Reference was made to the implications of each of the options in relation to devolution, which would also need to be implemented over forthcoming years. Concerns were raised that a north Worcestershire unitary authority might have limited influence with regard to final arrangements for a strategic authority in the region. The suggestion was made that Redditch might have more influence over arrangements for a new strategic authority and how an elected Mayor operated in the region if the Borough was represented by a single unitary authority. However, Members also commented that a north Worcestershire unitary authority could focus on the specific issues that tended to impact on the more urban north of the county, which differed from the south of the county that tended to be more rural.

A number of Councillors expressed their regrets that, as a result of LGR, Redditch Borough Council would cease to exist. Questions were raised about the impact that this might have on local democracy regardless of the model of unitary authority that was introduced moving forward. However, Members also commented that LGR provided an opportunity to modernise and improve local government and the suggestion was made that this could have a positive impact in the Borough.

The timescales available to complete the LGR process were debated. Members noted that the Government had announced LGR in the Government's English Devolution White Paper that had been published in December 2024. Since then, a lot of work had been undertaken by local Councils to review the options available in Worcestershire for reorganisation. Concerns were raised that the timescales available were quite tight and Members commented that

there was a risk that this could result in rushed decisions being taken.

The physical base for a future unitary authority or unitary authorities was also discussed. Members commented that, on the date of the meeting, there remained uncertainty about which offices would continue to be used and where Council and Committee meetings would take place. Concerns were raised that, should a meeting venue be used that was located some distance from Redditch, this might disenfranchise Redditch residents, particularly those residents without access to their vehicles, due to challenges highlighted by Members with transport infrastructure in the county.

The population that would be served by two unitary authorities as opposed to a single Council was considered at the meeting. Members noted that whilst the Government had initially highlighted that Unitary Authorities would be expected to serve a population of at least 500,000, the Minister of State for Local Government had subsequently clarified that there was flexibility. Members noted that a number of existing unitary authorities already served populations that were far lower than 500,000. However, questions were raised as to whether efficiencies could be achieved if two unitary authorities in Worcestershire delivered services to much lower populations.

The future of the assets owned by Redditch Borough Council was also discussed by Members. It was noted that Redditch Borough Council was the only local authority in Worcestershire to retain a Council housing stock and concerns were raised about the potential for these houses, as well as other assets, such as the leisure venues managed by Rubicon Leisure Limited on behalf of the Council, to be sold by a future unitary authority. Members expressed the view that these assets needed to be protected for the benefit of future generations and the suggestion was made that the introduction of Parish and Town Councils in the Borough prior to delivery of LGR could assist with this process.

Consideration was given to the number of Councillors that would serve on the new unitary Council(s). In a single unitary authority for Worcestershire, Members commented that each Councillor would be expected to represent circa 6,000 residents whereas, if north and south Worcestershire Councils were introduced, each Member would represent approximately 4,000 residents. Concerns were highlighted that the former scenario could be difficult to manage, particularly for Members with work and other personal commitments. Questions were also raised about the extent to which Councillors representing 6,000 residents in a single unitary authority could be said to be accessible to the public and accountable to the people or able to engage with and empower

their local communities effectively. The suggestion was made that under Option B, this would be more achievable, and it was noted that Councillors representing 4,000 residents would be closer to the average number of residents represented by Councillors at existing unitary authorities in the country.

For all of the Options, Members commented that the role of a Councillor would be like that of a full-time job. The suggestion was made that Members would need to receive appropriate remuneration in order for the role to be viable. Concerns were raised that without suitable remuneration, candidates from deprived backgrounds might be deterred from standing in local elections and this would impact on the diversity of local Members moving forward.

Consideration was given to the implications of each of the models in relation to localism. Concerns were raised that a single unitary authority would be more distant from local communities and that this model could undermine local identities. By contrast, Members commented that two unitary authorities, for the north and south of the county, would be in a stronger position to continue to maintain local identities.

Members made reference to the opportunities that could arise from LGR and in doing so referred to lessons learned from existing unitary authorities located in the West Midlands. Particular reference was made to Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, both of which had secured considerable financial investment, including in respect of local regeneration projects. In both cases, it was noted that these unitary authorities served residents living in defined geographical areas with strong local identities.

The different financial situations of the seven authorities in Worcestershire was also considered during the debate. Members noted that currently, Redditch Borough Council had strong financial reserves. By contrast, some of the other local authorities, particularly Worcestershire County Council, were struggling financially and had accumulated debts. Members commented that as a result of the LGR process, consideration would need to be given to how these debts would be addressed, and it was noted that under Option B, a process for calculating how to share these debts between the two new unitary authorities would need to be identified and agreed.

The provision of SEND services to children and young people living in the county was considered. Concerns were raised that the needs of children living in urban areas, like Redditch Borough, differed from the needs of children living in rural areas in the south of the

county. The suggestion was made that current arrangements for service delivery needed to change in order to meet local needs.

Members noted that five of the six district Councils in Worcestershire (with the exception of Wyre Forest District Council, which had agreed a direction of travel when debating a Motion at Council in February 2025) had been due to debate the Options Appraisal issued by Mutual Ventures at Council meetings held during the first week of September. The other four District Councils had already met to consider the report and it was noted that they had all endorsed Option B.

In concluding their discussions, Members thanked Officers for their hard work preparing the report for Members' consideration. Mutual Ventures was also thanked for their help, including with regard to preparing the Options Appraisal for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED that

- 1) the matters set out in the report and the findings of the Options Appraisal carried out by Mutual Ventures; and appendices associated with the Mutual Ventures report listed within their report as Appendix A - Financial modelling and assumptions, Appendix B – Shape Worcestershire: outputs from public engagement, staff surveys and focus groups and Appendix C – Place profiles be noted;**
- 2) the following model of Local Government re-organisation be selected as the Council's preferred option to be progressed to be developed into the final proposals for submission to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government by the deadline of 28th November 2025:**

OPTION B: Two Unitary Authorities made up of North Worcestershire (covering Bromsgrove District, Redditch Borough and Wyre Forest District) and South Worcestershire (covering Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wychavon District) providing the former district/borough and county council local government services for each area;

- 3) having selected Option B, that Members instruct officers:**
 - a) to undertake further analysis and development of the option selected under Recommendation 2 above;**

- b) to bring back to Members at a Council meeting in November a set of final proposals for their consideration representing the Council's draft submission on Local Government Re-organisation; and
 - c) in recognition of the requirement to collaborate with other authorities when putting forward plans for Local Government Reorganisation, to work with the Leader of this Council and Leader or Leaders of any other authorities which have chosen the same option to develop joint final proposals for consideration at the meeting referred to in recommendation 3(b);
- 4) to delegate authority to the Chief Executive following consultation with the Leader to work with other Councils and consultants as necessary; and
 - 5) to agree a supplementary budget estimate of up to £100,000 to allow further work on the Council's proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. This would be in two tranches of firstly £50,000 with a second tranche of £50,000 to be drawn only if required, under authority delegated to the Chief Executive following consultation with the Leader of the Council.

(During consideration of this item, there was an adjournment from 20:56 to 21:10).

33. URGENT BUSINESS - GENERAL (IF ANY)

There was no urgent business for consideration on this occasion.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 9.39 pm