

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET – TUESDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2025



Title of Report	DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER UPDATE	
Presented by	Councillor Richard Blunt Leader of the Council PH Briefed <input type="checkbox" value="yes"/>	
Background Papers	Cabinet report – 9 January 2025	Public Report: Yes
		Key Decision: No
Financial Implications	At its meeting on 20 February, Council approved a budget of £100,000 to support any work necessary to respond to the Government’s proposals for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	There are no direct legal implications arising from this report, however, legal advice will be sought, where necessary, in relation to the next steps.	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	The Chief Executive, Directors, the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development and the Communications Team have been working collaboratively with their counterparts in the district councils and Rutland County Council on the response to the White Paper.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Purpose of Report	<p>To update Cabinet on the work being undertaken by the Chief Executive and Leader, in liaison with district and borough councils in Leicestershire and Rutland County Council, to meet the Government’s initial deadline for draft responses to be submitted from all two-tier areas in response to the Government’s English Devolution White Paper by 21 March 2025.</p> <p>To seek delegation to the Chief Executive in liaison with the Leader to submit an initial response to Government.</p> <p>A Final Proposal is required by Government to be submitted by 28 November.</p>	
Reason for Decision	It is a Cabinet function to consider and make proposals in relation to local government reorganisation. Due to the tight timescales, a delegation is required to enable an initial	

	<p>response to be provided by the deadline of 21 March 2025 on a possible approach to local government reorganisation in Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland. This would be subject to wider stakeholder engagement prior to final proposals being submitted by 28 November 2025.</p>
<p>Recommendations</p>	<p>THAT CABINET:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) NOTES THE WORK BEING UNDERTAKEN BY THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO RESPOND TO THE GOVERNMENT'S ENGLISH DEVOLUTION BILL BY THE DEADLINE OF 21 MARCH 2025 AND PROVIDE ANY COMMENTS TO THE LEADER TO FURTHER INFORM THIS WORK. 2) NOTES THAT THE VIEWS OF MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL EXPRESSED AT ITS MEETING ON 20 FEBRUARY 2025 WILL ALSO BE CONSIDERED AS PART OF THE PROCESS. 3) DELEGATES AUTHORITY TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE IN LIAISON WITH THE LEADER TO SUBMIT A JOINT RESPONSE WITH THE OTHER DISTRICT AND BOROUGH COUNCILS IN LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND COUNTY COUNCIL ON A SUGGESTED APPROACH TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN LEICESTER, LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND TO MEET THE GOVERNMENT'S DEADLINE OF 21 MARCH 2025. 4) NOTES THAT FURTHER STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WILL BE UNDERTAKEN LEADING UP TO THE SUBMISSION OF A FINAL PROPOSAL BY 28 NOVEMBER 2025.

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Cabinet was advised at its meeting on 9 January 2025 of the content of the English Devolution White Paper published by the Government on 16 December 2024. The paper set out the Government's ambitions to see universal coverage in England of Strategic Authorities which should be a number of councils working together, covering areas that people recognise and work in. The Government intends to redistribute powers from central to local government to these authorities.
- 1.2 In addition to devolution of powers, the White Paper proposed that all remaining two-tier areas and smaller unitary councils would be expected to develop proposals for reorganisation, with all councils working together in the best interests of the whole area as swiftly as possible. The Government has expressed a preference for new unitary councils to cover a population of 500,000 residents or more, however, the minister has said there may be exceptions to this where it makes sense for an area, on a case-by-case basis.
- 1.3 The Government invited county and unitary councils to express an interest in being part of its priority programme specifically where reorganisation would unlock devolution. Those areas selected will see elections planned for May 2025 being

deferred, with the expectation that elections to shadow authorities take place in May 2026.

- 1.4 Leicestershire County Council wrote to Government in January 2025 to express an interest, in being part of the priority programme. District Councils also wrote to Government asking that this request was not accepted to give sufficient time for proposals to be developed that made sense locally. In February 2025, the Government announced those areas that would be part of its priority programme and Leicestershire was not part of this. County Council Elections will, therefore, go ahead as planned on 1 May 2025.
- 1.5 The Government then wrote to all councils on 5 February 2025 formally inviting councils to work collaboratively with other councils in their areas to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation. A copy of the letter and the criteria and guidance for the development of proposals, and the timeline for this process is set out at Appendix 1.
- 1.6 The Government has made it clear that no change is not an option.

2.0 TIMELINES AND NEXT STEPS FOR INTERIM PLANS AND FULL PROPOSALS

- 2.1 The Government has asked for interim plans to be submitted on or before 21 March 2025, in line with the guidance set out in their letter. This timescale is incredibly challenging. This will not be a pass-fail date for proposals but will commence further discussions with Government on a proposed approach. Ideally, the Government would like to see one proposal per area, but they understand that in some areas this will not be possible. Full proposals need to be submitted by 28 November 2025.
- 2.2 The proposed timescales for the creation of new unitary councils that are not part of the Government's priority programme are that shadow authorities are elected in May 2027 with new councils being created from April 2028.
- 2.3 The timetable for the creation of Strategic Authorities is less clear, however, it is anticipated that new mayoral elections could take place in April 2027.

3.0 LOCAL POSITION

- 3.1 Since the publication of the White Paper, Leicestershire County Council has made it clear that it intends to submit a proposal for a single county unitary for Leicestershire, excluding Rutland. Leaders and Chief Executives of the district and borough councils and Rutland County Council have been working closely together do not agree with the County Council's view.
- 3.2 The Leaders of the district councils and Rutland County Council have issued a joint statement saying that they are extremely disappointed that the County Council is continuing with its proposal to create one single unitary council for the whole of Leicestershire with no discussion or engagement with other councils.
- 3.3 They believe that this is not in the spirit of, or meets, the Government expectations on how it wishes to see local government reorganisation developed.
- 3.4 Although they do not believe the current system is broken, if change is to happen then the collective view is that one single county unitary serving 800,000 residents, one of

the largest in the country, would be too remote, too cumbersome, too inaccessible and ultimately inefficient and unsustainable.

- 3.5 Whilst the County Council has listened to Rutland County Council, who have made it clear that they do not want to be part of a large single unitary for Leicestershire, the County Council's proposal does not address the expectation that change should be coterminous with health, fire and police or that the government expect local government reorganisation proposals that include Rutland.
- 3.6 The district councils in Leicestershire and Rutland County Council are working together and engaging with stakeholders to develop proposals which will deliver localised, high-quality, efficient and sustainable public services for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.
- 3.7 Whilst work is taking shape, it is expected that the approach will not be finalised until close to the deadline of 21 March 2025. This deadline is not of the Councils' collective making. The approach, however, will set out how many new councils would strike the right balance between size and maintaining a strong local connection to communities. There is a desire to keep the local in local government.
- 3.8 Any new unitary councils should reflect the way people live their lives in that area and be aligned to where people live, work, shop and play. Councils are exploring options for smaller unitary authorities which will serve local communities' needs better but also enhance their future prosperity.
- 3.9 Having initially assessed the options, the current direction of travel based on the evidence collected so far is that a preference for a North Leicestershire and Rutland, South Leicestershire and Leicester City Council, three unitary model is emerging. The rationale for this is that it presents a strong place narrative and opportunities regarding working with partners across neighbourhoods and communities.
- 3.10 The Councils want to ensure that the final proposals will build on this initial evidence and backed by engagement with local communities, businesses and organisations.
- 3.11 As the first initial deadline is very tight, some initial engagement is taking place with stakeholders who represent a wide range of people, communities and sectors to help shape our interim plans. In North West Leicestershire this has included a discussion at the Council meeting on 20 February 2025 to enable the Leader to listen to the views of elected members, a meeting with Parish Councils and informal discussions with a range of local partners including the police, health, housing, National Forest.
- 3.12 Given the above timescales, delegation is being requested for the Chief Executive, in liaison with the Leader, to sign off the joint approach to local government reorganisation for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland by the Government's deadline. Failure to submit an approach would mean the Government would only receive the proposal from Leicestershire County Council which is not the desired outcome.
- 3.12 It is acknowledged, however, that a more comprehensive package of member and public engagement will need to follow this submission prior to the final deadline of 28 November 2025 for detailed proposals to be submitted.
- 3.13 It is also understood that the Government will also carry out a consultation on any final proposal so there will be ample opportunity for people to get involved.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning and regeneration - Communities and housing - Clean, green and Zero Carbon - A well-run council
Policy Considerations:	None directly arising from the report.
Safeguarding:	None directly arising from the report.
Equalities/Diversity:	There are no equality implications arising from the recommendations in this report. In developing any proposals for a unitary structure regard will be given to equality implications and how the proposals might affect those groups with protected characteristics.
Customer Impact:	None directly arising from the report although depending on the future structure of local government services customers may be impacted. This will need to be given detailed consideration.
Economic and Social Impact:	None directly arising from the report.
Environment, Climate Change and Zero Carbon:	None directly arising from the report.
Consultation/Community/Tenant Engagement:	Local people should be engaged in shaping proposals that will impact on how they receive services in the future.
Risks:	<p>There is no consensus on local government arrangements in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland will be reached and a solution could be imposed on the Council by Central Government.</p> <p>Not submitting a suggested approach would mean the only proposal on the table for Government to consider would be the one received from Leicestershire County Council for a single County unitary.</p> <p>Local services could be impacted negatively. Financially the biggest drain on council budgets is with social care. Putting this huge important and costly service in the same authority as other services that are important to local people – things like street cleaning, anti-social behaviour, parks, leisure centres – could put these services at risk as the cost of providing social care increases.</p>
Officer Contact	<p>Allison Thomas Chief Executive allison.thomas@nwleicestershire.gov.uk</p>

