
Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	13 February 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Jeff Brooks
Report Author:	Gabrielle Mancini
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4659

1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 The purpose of this paper is:

- To provide an update on the Government’s intentions for local government devolution and reorganisation.
- To provide details of the Leader of Council’s intention to enter conversations about both of these matters with neighbouring local authorities and Central Government on West Berkshire Council’s behalf.

2 Recommendations

2.1 That the Executive:

- Notes the update on the Government’s intentions for local government devolution and reorganisation.
- Notes the Leader of Council’s intention to enter conversations about both of these matters with neighbouring local authorities and Central Government on West Berkshire Council’s behalf.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	N/A at this time
Human Resource:	N/A at this time

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Legal:	N/A at this time			
Risk Management:	N/A at this time			
Property:	N/A at this time			
Policy:	N/A at this time			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		
Environmental Impact:		x		
Health Impact:		x		
ICT Impact:		x		
Digital Services Impact:		x		

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Council Strategy Priorities:		x		
Core Business:		x		
Data Impact:		x		
Consultation and Engagement:	Corporate Board Cllr Jeff Brooks			

4 Background

4.1 In December 2024 the Government issued the English Devolution White Paper setting out the path to rebuild and reform local government along the following parameters:

- The formation of Strategic Authorities, which are defined as a Mayoral County Combined Authority, a Mayoral Combined Authority, a Non-Mayoral Combined Authority or a Non-Mayoral Combined County Authority. These authorities will have a population of at least 1.5m.
- Dissolution of the current two-tier system of district and county councils. Unitary councils should have populations of around 500k

4.2 There are three options for Strategic Authorities which should have a population of at least 1.5m population

- Foundation Strategic Authorities** - These authorities will be without a Mayor and will be provided with limited devolution powers and access to funding
- Strategic Authorities** – These authorities will have a Mayor and will be given significant powers and access to funding.
- Established Strategic Authorities** – these are strategic mayoral authorities that have operated successfully and have demonstrated delivery to Government and will be able to access further powers and funding.

4.3 The Government has stopped short of instructing places on how to reorganise local government, and arrive at successor councils, but instead has been clear that places must work together on a proposal for the benefit of residents. However, it is the Government's intention that these Strategic Authorities will be formed on the basis of established economic or public sector service boundaries. It has also been indicated that unitary authorities will be asked, and if necessary mandated, to join a Strategic Authority.

5 Current status

Strategic authority

5.1 The Government scheme for devolution is intended to move away from the bespoke 'deal making environment'. Strategic Authorities will be able to access significant long-term funding as well as the powers set out below, although the extent of these powers will be dependent on the type of strategic authority adopted (as set out in paragraph 4.2 above):

1. Transport and local infrastructure;
2. Skills and employment support;
3. Housing and strategic planning;
4. Economic development and regeneration;
5. Environment and climate change,
6. Health, wellbeing and public service reform, and
7. Public safety.

5.2 In respect of the intention that Strategic Authorities will be formed on the basis of established economic or public sector service boundaries, West Berkshire has coterminous Police and Crime authority and Health boundaries with Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. It also has coterminous functional economic links with the remaining Berkshire authorities, which have long been the basis of joint working, including through the Local Enterprise Partnership and more recently, the Berkshire Prosperity Board.

Local government reorganisation

5.3 West Berkshire has a population of almost 170,000 and although it is a unitary; this is below the 500k population threshold indicated as preferred for a unitary council by the government. As such, seeking an arrangement with neighbouring authorities will be vital to ensure that this threshold is reached. This could involve working with fellow Berkshire authorities or looking further afield into Wiltshire or Oxfordshire for suitable partners.

5.4 Seeking an arrangement on the basis of commonality of economy, demography and geography could have advantages for West Berkshire and give discussions the best possible chance of success. It will be important to consider these factors when considering options for local government reorganisation with fellow local authorities.

5.5 In summary, it is suggested that there will be a number of options for both the formation of a strategic authority and local government reorganisation which should be considered.

Implications and impact

5.6 Devolution and local government reorganisation will both have significant impacts on West Berkshire. These impacts are likely to range from economic, financial, HR, Legal,

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Procurement and Property, as well as direct impact on services and their users. Until further discussions have been undertaken, it is not possible to quantify or qualify these impacts. However, it will be important to ensure that they- as well as their associated risks- are factored into the discussions that the Leader of Council has with neighbouring local authorities and Government

Proposals

- 5.7 The Leader of Council, supported by the Chief Executive, will begin to enter into conversations with neighbouring authorities and Government with a view to establishing what options may exist to propose devolution and local government organisation arrangements.
- 5.8 In order to plan for the impact of any changes on West Berkshire Council, the Council intends to set up the following governance groups:
- An internal project board focusing on devolution
 - An internal project board focused on local government reorganisation
- 5.9 Each of these project boards will have a lead officer at both Executive Director and Service Director level. A Devolution Advisory Group comprised of elected members will also be established to enable discussion at strategic level.

6 Proposals

It is recommended that the Executive:

- Notes the update on the Government's intentions for local government devolution and reorganisation.
- Notes the Leader of Council's intention to enter conversations about both of these matters with neighbouring local authorities and Central Government on West Berkshire Council's behalf.

7 Other options considered

- 7.1 There is an option not to enter into discussions on these topics, however this is not recommended as the Government intends to proceed with plans for both devolution and local government reorganisation.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 Local government devolution and reorganisation are among the flagship policies of the Government and it is intended that progress will be made on each of these within the current Parliament.
- 8.2 It is essential that West Berkshire Council discusses and negotiates the best possible options to drive positive outcomes for the people and businesses of West Berkshire. It is therefore recommended that Council notes the information within this paper and that

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

the Leader of Council progresses discussions with neighbouring authorities and Government.

9 Appendices

1) Devolution white paper

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: No:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Item is Urgent Key Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Report is to note only | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

Officer details:

Name: Gabrielle Mancini
Job Title: Acting Service Director - Transformation
