

Leader Decisions

Friday 10 January 2025

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Isobel Seccombe OBE

In Attendance

Councillor Sarah Boad

Councillor Barbara Brown

Councillor Jonathan Chilvers

Councillor Judy Falp

Councillor John Holland

Councillor Dave Humphreys

Councillor Marian Humphreys

Councillor Jan Matecki

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse

Councillor Martin Watson

1. English Devolution White Paper - County Council elections 2025

Councillor Isobel Seccombe, Leader, noted that the government had published the 'English Devolution White Paper' on 16 December 2024 which focussed on the delivery of devolution and local government reform including the creation of new unitary councils. Subsequently, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution had written to upper tier councils regarding the potential to postpone May 2025 county council elections for those councils where the timing of elections would affect implementation of the White Paper proposals. The report before the Leader set out the options to respond and recommended a proactive and positive response.

Councillor Seccombe welcomed registered public speakers to the meeting and called each to make their address in the order of registration.

Councillor George Cowcher, Deputy Leader of Stratford-on-Avon District Council noted the importance of the decision being made since this was the first significant change proposed to local government for 50 years. He understood the reasoning for the preferred option but raised some questions for consideration in the decision making:

- Whilst he appreciated the short time scales involved, he was concerned there had been no meaningful consultation with other councils. Despite the short-timescales there had been significant consultation in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.

- What consideration had been given to other options, for example the option of having two unitary councils as he did not see significant commonality of interests between the south and north of the county.
- He recognised aspirations to join West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), and opposed this aim, also noting that Richard Parker, Mayor of the West Midlands, had gone on record to say he was not interested in seeing a change to WMCA boundaries. If membership to WMCA was rejected, what was the Plan B as it was clear the new unitary authority would need to be part of a strategic authority.
- He noted social care was the biggest call on the county's budget and he considered putting a structure in place before the outcome of the upcoming social care review did not seem prudent.
- He also considered it was essential that elections in May 2025 continued as planned. He pointed out that the political landscape had changed since 2021 and it was important to ensure that the county council reflected the up to date views of residents in the area.

Councillor Isabelle McKenzie of Rugby Borough Council (but speaking in her capacity as an interested person), expressed the view that Rugby was forgotten in Warwickshire, not being a part of the north, south or east. She feared the town would be even more marginalised after the proposed reorganisation, particularly as there was not a town council in place, and unless steps were taken to correct this through the re-organisation, the town would lose its voice. She highlighted the challenges in the borough, including town centre regeneration and her fears that funds set aside for this would be swallowed by budgetary demands relating to social care and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). She pointed out that other areas in Warwickshire similarly did not benefit from being parished and that although there were some exemplar town and parish councils in the county, there were others where there were challenges in recruiting representatives. In her view, town and parish councils would be more important after unitarisation, but if seats could not be filled, local democracy would be weakened and the voice of local communities lost.

Councillor Alan Boad, leader of the Liberal Democrat Group at Warwick District Council, asked the Leader not to rush to respond to the government or ask for the election to be postponed. He noted that this was the largest change proposed to local government since 1974 and it was important to get the right result for residents. He asked that a cross-party approach be taken to lead a consultation with stakeholders, residents, businesses, elected members, and neighbouring authorities before imposing any local government reform that risked diminishing local representation. He noted that the County Council had held unitary ambitions since 2020 but that the district and borough councils had not been persuaded to support these plans and the White Paper appeared to present an opportunity for the County Council's aims to prevail. It was his view that decision making powers should be nearer to the communities any new council would service, not taken away to a distant body that had no interest in the varied communities across Warwickshire. By way of example he suggested that consideration could be given to devolving non-statutory services to towns and parishes. Councillor Boad stated that setting up a new strategic authority would take time, consulting with neighbouring authorities, existing unitary authorities and combined authorities. He suggested that some existing members of WMCA may believe that their best interests lay in creating a new strategic authority with Warwickshire and in doing so, he emphasised previous comments made regarding the Mayor of the West Midlands public view on the topic. Councillor Boad considered it would take time to have these conversations and some options may not be available when decisions on the organisation of unitary authorities were made so these discussions should take place in parallel. Holding elections

in May would, in his view, give a fresh mandate to those elected to lead Warwickshire through the reforms and prepare for future success, whereas he considered postponing the elections and rushing the decision was not in the best interests of Warwickshire. He concluded by reiterating his request that the Leader not ask for the postponement.

Warwick District Councillor Phil Kohler, who was also speaking as an interested party not as a district councillor, noted that that the previous week's edition of the Warwick Courier included an article quoting the Leader on the case for change and how it contributed to Warwickshire as being seen to be 'ready to go'. He had sought out the document which had been published in August 2020 and he considered that it was brief, pitched at a high level and did not include sufficient data. He shared quotes from the document, refuting assertions that "the county has an outstanding track record of delivering major infrastructure" by citing the A46 Stoneleigh Junction as an example to the contrary, and noted that whilst the document addressed climate change it did not include the County's planned expenditure on off-setting. He further noted plans to extend and strengthen the role of town and parish councils without specifics or acknowledgement that there were no town councils for Nuneaton, Bedworth or Rugby. The document also referenced Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership which had since closed, there was a single mention of council housing and no mention of the Investment Zone. The implementation roadmap, covering numerous projects representing a significant amount of work, were arranged across five work streams aligned to an ambitious fixed timeline. Councillor Kohler suggested that scope and quality would be sacrificed for speed if this timeline were adhered to. Using these points as an example, he was of the view that the document did not make a compelling case for change. Instead, he considered there was a lot of work to be done which it would be foolish to attempt to expedite. He urged consultation with residents and businesses of Warwickshire to discover what they wanted, with neighbouring authorities to discuss possibilities and also, the electorate in May so that they could choose who would lead Warwickshire through the process.

Mr Philip Burns, a resident of Rugby, noted the range of views and concerns expressed about the rush to be in the first tranche. He aligned himself with those who did not object to the principle of devolution and unitarisation but was concerned that the process of delivering change was unclear and had the potential for an adverse impact. He noted that the district councils were calling for caution and sought to understand where the desire for a rushed approach originated and why that was driving the agenda. He noted that paragraph 3.4 of the report stated that the decision was urgent because if the council were not able to implement the proposed decision with immediate effect, it would seriously prejudice the council and the public interest in that it would not afford Warwickshire the best chance of securing advantage through early implementation of the government's White Paper policies, but it did not explain what that advantage was, and he pondered upon whether this meant a quick response would prevent any alternative alignment of boundaries being considered or alternatively was there something as yet undefined in danger of being lost. His specific questions were therefore: given the enthusiasm to take this opportunity now before all questions had been asked and answered, what evaluation had been given to the possibility of a geographic landscape which differed from the existing Warwickshire County Council emerging; what consultation had been held in the previous two months within the borough, district, town and parish councils within the current geographic boundary of Warwickshire; where is the impact assessment of the proposed actions; where is the SWOT analysis identifying the risks and threats of following this path (as opposed to not doing so) and what control measures were in place to mitigate them. He concluded by considering that there were too many unknowns to proceed with a decision at this time.

Councillor Seccombe then introduced the content of the report, seeking to answer questions raised as she did so.

She stated that the White Paper had been published on 16 December, close to the Christmas break. The intentions of government were made clear in the paper and through a number of online sessions held by civil servants from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) that the whole of local government would be unitarised by 2028. The question for Warwickshire was whether to seek to join the priority stream (ie the first tranche) or wait a year. There were reasons why it would be advantageous to move forward at this stage in time including:

- County Council elections were scheduled for May 2025, with a budget of around £1m. Not being part of the priority stream would likely mean that elections would take place both this year and next. At a time when budgets were stretched, this was a profligate use of funds.
- 70% of local authority funds were currently being spent on high level services (adult social care, children's services, SEND, and home to school transport) with demand outstripping resources. Every year that the inevitable decision to move to unitary was delayed, resulted in a squeeze on the universal services that every resident valued. An improvement in local government finances did not seem likely, particularly following the autumn statement which had resulted in a reduction in funds to spend on services. There were undoubtedly savings to be made by moving to unitary status, as the case for change identified in 2020. Such savings would not affect capital projects (eg the regeneration programme in Rugby) as such funds were already put aside. Councillor Seccombe did, however, accept that the case for change was a high level document that required updating.
- Each local authority concerned had a fantastic workforce to support the decision-making process and deliver the best services possible. Over the coming months, many of those staff may look to move to newly formed councils and, in making an early decision, there was a better chance of retaining those staff to shape the Warwickshire that residents deserved.
- Councillor Seccombe urged councillors across all tiers of government in the county to be part of shaping a new Warwickshire council, and to step up and preserve the best practices of all those councils. She placed value on town and parish councils and embraced the diversity that they represented, and which was worth preserving. As part of this it would be important to ensure that town and parish councils were supported to take on larger roles if they wanted (eg Alcester Town Council's nationally recognised Health and Wellbeing Programme) but not to feel under any onerous obligation to do so. Her vision was not a council centralised in Warwick, but rather perhaps recreating more community area committees, local planning committees, etc.
- Any proposed delay to the county council elections in May 2025 was due to the amount of work that needed to be done to set up a new council, with each workstream perhaps being managed by different councils to help shape the end result.
- Councillor Seccombe noted that in meeting with the Minister, it was made clear that there would be no local consultation and any consultation would be a ministerial consultation. The consultation, run by MHCLG, would be hosted on local councils' websites and local councils signpost key partners to engage with it. She trusted that a place in the priority stream would mean that that a preconceived, top down model would not be delivered and there would be chance to shape a new model council that Warwickshire could be proud of.
- In terms of different options, Councillor Seccombe explained that she had fielded a number of telephone calls from different surrounding councils but, she noted that the White Paper was clear that unitary models should be based on functioning economic geographies and functioning health geographies. It was clear where these geographies lay in Warwickshire

and it would be hard to argue a functioning economic geography with, for instance, Worcestershire as it would result in a central large rural expanse. That being said, it may be easier to argue for a functioning health geography as SWFT had an overarching trust with Worcestershire. It was also important to note that the Minister had stated there was no intention to unknit any current partnership arrangements.

- Councils in Warwickshire had existing relationships with WMCA but membership of that authority was not a question to be answered in the decision making at this meeting.
- Noting the issue of the time frame for this decision, Councillor Seccombe indicated that she had at all times sought not to be political on this issue. She was seeking to do the best she could for Warwickshire residents. She believed it was owed to local government staff and taxpayers to behave in an appropriate manner and ensure that party politics were exceeded on this issue.
- She acknowledged the perceived rushed approach but emphasised that this was a government time frame with 10 January 2025 being their deadline for a response.

Councillor Seccombe then invited comments from the county councillors who had attended the meeting.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse shared his understanding from the County Councils Network that re-organisation was something that councils needed to do within an expedited timeframe. However, with regard to the WMCA and working in partnership, he sought assurance that there would be cross-party working at all levels and how that would be achieved. He sought further assurance for town and parish councils about how community governance would work in the future and that there would not be a 'raid' on the reserves of district and borough councils to support unitarisation. He recognised that the county council was being portrayed in a negative light and he made it clear that under the proposals all the six primary councils in Warwickshire would disappear and a new council would emerge. He gave his assurance that the Liberal Democrat group were ready to work hard together to ensure the best deal for residents across Warwickshire. Finally, he made the point that it could have been possible to suspend standing orders and hold a Full Council meeting, providing opportunity for public speaking, and the chance for every member to debate the issue. Finally, Councillor Roodhouse noted that the secretaries of state and those in ministerial positions were generally from metropolitan or city council areas, and were looking at mayoral models, moving money from the shires to the cities and metropolitan areas, and he was of the view that this was a problematic national position which he sought reassurance on.

Councillor Sarah Boad expressed her dismay at the approach of central government to impose re-organisation and the speed at which the plans were progressing, particularly with the window for that response taking in the Christmas period. She lamented the lack of consultation and the opportunities that were lost in terms of the potential for two unitary authorities, or merging with authorities outside Warwickshire. She further expressed concern regarding funding for local government which she considered to be in the worst position it had ever been in and how there was potential for the demands on county budgets to swallow up funds that had been earmarked for other services by the district and borough councils. Councillor Boad shared her concerns that government Ministers were not liaising on the issue of adult social care and she saw no signs of additional funding for these services. Councillor Boad expressed her support for involving the whole of Warwickshire in planning re-organisation due to the short timescales involved. She also asked how compensation for delayed elections would be made and, noting the change in political landscape since the last elections in 2021, she criticised the suggestion that the elections should be cancelled. In her view, cancellation of the election would mean a conservative council taking

this decision rather than allowing the electorate to decide who should now be in administration to do so.

Councillor Jonathan Chilvers stated that he profoundly disagreed with the recommendation. He had spent time over Christmas looking at the county council budget and reminding himself of the deficits in home to school transport, SEND and older people care that were taking the council to the brink. He stated that local authorities were struggling to stay afloat and he believed that unitarisation would not help to solve those issues with any savings dwarfed by the deficits. Instead, the time and resource of senior leaders would be diverted to re-arranging services. He was of the view that postponing the elections would leave the existing administration in power for a further two years as the Shadow Council would not be in place until 2027 and he considered this would be an unacceptable democratic deficit. He sought assurances that the Leader would include in her response to the Minister that there was not unanimity on the way forward in Warwickshire and he sought a commitment to the full parishing of the county including consideration of devolution of powers to town and parish councils.

Drawing on her experience as a district councillor as well as a county councillor, Councillor Judy Falp noted that she had already noted an impact on staff at district level and she anticipated that this was the same for staff at the county council as it was clear there would be a finite number of jobs. She urged that briefings take place for staff as the process progressed so that they could be reassured. She stated that residents in her division were not happy at the prospect of the elections being delayed to the extent that the current administration was in power for six years and she considered the electorate should be given the choice as to whether they still wanted her to continue as their elected representative. She also noted that some councillors would not welcome a delay due their intentions to stand down in May for personal reasons. Like others, whilst she was not against a unitary council, she considered the process was being rushed.

Councillor John Holland explained that he had been to meetings recently where Angela Rayner, Deputy Prime Minister, had set out a strategy for transferring power to councils and the White Paper was the manifestation of Labour Party election promises. Based on those pledges, four of the six county MPs were Labour. It was important to move forward together and, whilst it was necessary to move forward with unitarisation, it was also important to take account of the points raised. He agreed that Warwickshire was a diverse county with different needs and aspirations and, therefore, a clear structure would be needed. He referred to the area committees that had operated in the past as a way of enabling local people to make decisions and he also supported the continuation of town and parish councils. With stakeholders entering the process from different viewpoints, he believed it would take time and effort to find structures that would work for Warwickshire. He accepted that the deferral of elections was an important consideration and one which the government would adjudicate on considering all the different views involved, including the potential costs. He did not consider that a directly elected mayor was appropriate for Warwickshire and noted that the government had not indicated that this was a requirement. He also noted that the authority could not join WMCA until the next election cycle in 2028 so a decision on this point would come at a later date but his view was that Warwickshire was in the best position as an associate member. He urged a forward looking approach to identify, with local voices, the real issues that needed addressing.

Councillor Martin Watson noted the differences in operation between the public and private sectors. From a business perspective, there were services that all six local councils provided that it would make sense to combine not only to make savings but also to identify best practice and a

better delivery mechanism. As Portfolio Holder for Economy, he was very proud of Warwickshire's economy and low rate of unemployment. It was a strong and diverse local economy and a model that worked was essential. He emphasised that since the debate on the previous case for change, unitarisation had not specifically been on the county agenda until the publication of the White Paper but it was now necessary to progress on this journey and ensure the best outcome for Warwickshire. Whilst it may not be a comfortable position, it was better to be on the front foot.

Councillor Barbara Brown acknowledged that the pace of change was more speedy than anticipated but expressed her concerns that delay would mean that the opportunity to be involved in shaping the new unitary council would be lost. It was important to give people the opportunity to look flexibly what that involvement and shaping might look like in terms of localisation. She emphasised that Rugby did not have parishes or a town councils and there were fears among some residents that the shape that emerged would be an 'empire' with pockets of decision making and a complex cumbersome structure in the centre. However, whilst she accepted work needed to commence now her overriding concerns were about how the new authority would be shaped and emerge. In conclusion, she stated her agreement with the comments of Councillor Holland.

In making her decision, Councillor Seccombe noted concerns about the speed of the decision and perceived lack of consultation. She commented that she had met with the district and borough councils as the leaders and chief executives had all met three days after the government letter had been received. She had made telephone contact with as many people that she could think of that needed to be involved, including the group leaders at the county council and it was her intention that there would be a cross-party approach to taking the proposals forward. Whilst she understood that four of the district and borough councils were not supportive of the proposals, her view was that all of the local councils needed to be engaged in shaping a future council and she would also welcome them to be involved in that process. As part of the process, she supported the creation of more town and parish councils, with Rugby and Nuneaton and Bedworth being an obvious example where this was needed. In response to the comment made regarding a 'raid' on reserves, she hope that would not be the case. Whilst there would be contracts to renew and expenditure to be made over the next few years, the new council would need to live with the legacy of its predecessors' decisions. It was important that there was a sensible approach and decisions not be based in anger which would later come to be regretted.

She understood any decision to defer elections would be for a year and prior to the creation of a Shadow Council but more detail on this would not be known until a decision was made by government on whether to take Warwickshire forward in the priority stream. She did not see a long gap or lack of democracy; she saw experienced councillors being part of shaping decisions on behalf of their residents and if there was an election it may result in councillors with little or no experience having to navigate this path.

On balance, weighing up the benefits of being in the priority stream and the benefits of delaying, and considering all the comments that had been made, and drawing on her experience to date, Councillor Seccombe was of the view that the recommendation should be approved and the letter would be sent to the Minister that afternoon.

Whilst timescales were not yet known, this was the start of a long journey and she hoped that all those present would be a part of it.

Resolved:

That the Leader of the Council responds to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution signalling the County Council's willingness to be considered for delivering local government reorganisation and devolution to the Government's ambitious timeframe and recognising that, as a consequence, the Government may decide that it is necessary to postpone the May 2025 County Council elections.

The meeting ended at 1.32pm