

# County Council

Tuesday 18 February 2025

## Minutes

### Attendance

#### Committee Members

Councillor Chris Mills (Chair), Councillor Jo Barker, Councillor Richard Baxter-Payne, Councillor Margaret Bell, Councillor Sarah Boad, Councillor Barbara Brown, Councillor Peter Butlin, Councillor Jonathan Chilvers, Councillor Jeff Clarke, Councillor John Cooke, Councillor Andy Crump, Councillor Jackie D'Arcy, Councillor Tracey Drew, Councillor Judy Falp, Councillor Jenny Fradgley, Councillor Sarah Feeney, Councillor Bill Gifford, Councillor Peter Gilbert, Councillor Clare Golby, Councillor John Holland, Councillor Dave Humphreys, Councillor Marian Humphreys, Councillor Kam Kaur, Councillor Christopher Kettle, Councillor Sue Markham, Councillor Jan Matecki, Councillor Jeff Morgan, Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell, Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher, Councillor Daren Pemberton, Councillor Caroline Phillips, Councillor Kate Rolfe, Councillor Jerry Roodhouse, Councillor Isobel Seccombe OBE, Councillor Ian Shenton, Councillor Tim Sinclair, Councillor Heather Timms, Councillor Adrian Warwick, Councillor Martin Watson and Councillor Andrew Wright

### 1. General

#### (1) Apologies for Absence

Councillors Brett Beetham, Parminder Singh Birdi, Yousef Dahmash, Piers Daniel, Brian Hammersley, Andy Jenns, Jack Kennaugh, Dale Keeling, Justin Kerridge, Sarah Millar, Wallace Redford, Will Roberts, Jill Simpson-Vince, Mejar Singh, Mandy Tromans and Rob Tromans

#### (2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-pecuniary Interests

The Chairman advised Members that the Dispensation Sub Committee had met earlier on the day of this meeting, and granted a dispensation for Members with relevant disclosable pecuniary interests to speak and vote at any meeting in relation to the issues of Devolution, the English Devolution White Paper, and/or proposed unitary local government in Warwickshire.

The dispensation applied to Members who were Elected Members or Co-opted Members of a District or Borough Council, or a town or parish council, within Warwickshire; or whose Spouse or Partner was an Elected or Co-opted Member of a District or Borough Council, or a town or parish council, within Warwickshire; or whose Spouse or Partner was an employee of the County Council or a District or Borough Council within Warwickshire.

There were no other interests declared.

### **(3) Public Speaking**

The Chairman welcomed speakers to the meeting and advised that he was exercising his discretion to allow speeches up to 10 minutes.

#### **Councillor George Cowcher – Deputy Leader, Stratford-on-Avon District Council**

Councillor Cowcher noted that councillors across the county were faced with the proposition of creating something new for Warwickshire and Stratford-on-Avon councillors believed it was important to work together on the future arrangements. Whether the result was one new unitary council or more than one it was going to be a new council and not a development of either the County Council or any of the Districts and, therefore, everybody needed to play a part.

Councillor Cowcher made the point that the White Paper had two strands: local government reform and the strategic authority that the county would be working with for the future. He considered that the two were interlinked and could not be dealt with separately or sequentially and it was important that consideration of any strategic alignment sought the best fit for the people of Warwickshire. If the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) was not an option, other options needed to be explored and this would have implications for whether there was a preference for one or two unitary authorities in the county since the south of the county would have little in common with those authority areas adjacent to North Warwickshire and vice versa. It was important, therefore, to be clear that there was more than one option to consider for local government reform and vital to have an understanding of the arrangements for a strategic authority.

Councillor Cowcher emphasised that proposals should take account of how each council's assets and resources were accounted for. For example, he noted that Stratford-on-Avon District Council had sold its housing stock some years ago and as a result there were cash balances. This was money that had been contributed by council taxpayers in the District and it was important that the funding was ringfenced for people in Stratford and was not dispersed across the whole of the county. It was also one of the reasons why the District Council had been able to build positive relationships with town and parish councils and he recognised their importance in a rural district.

Finally, Councillor Cowcher noted that the county council elections would take place in May 2025. The legacy left behind for the new council was important and should not be unworkable. It was, therefore, the view of the District Council that the proposal to be submitted by the end of March needed to present at least two options, one of which was two new unitary authorities: one for South Warwickshire and one for North Warwickshire.

#### **Councillor Ian Davison – Leader, Warwick District Council**

Councillor Davison thanked Councillor Isobel Seccombe, Leader, and Monica Fogarty, Chief Executive, for meeting with the Chief Executives and Leaders of the five District and Borough Council in the previous week. He explained the meeting had proposed working together to gather evidence from multiple angles on the pros and cons of different unitary models, of which the viable options appeared to be a Warwickshire-wide unitary authority or a North

Warwickshire unitary authority alongside a South Warwickshire one.

He noted that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) had confirmed that, with elections due to take place in May, the new administration would not be bound by the current one and, therefore, decisions reached at this meeting would be open to change.

Councillor Davison asked the meeting to give thought to the most important considerations for the choices presented by reform. He noted that many questioned the government's wisdom of accelerating the simultaneous creation of strategic authorities across England and the unitarisation of county, district and borough councils. He considered the government was embarking on years of implementation chaos, while local councils were spending considerable sums on adult and child social care, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), home to school transport, homelessness, etc. Those services accounted for around 70 percent of combined budgets and, while optimistic assumptions might hope to make savings from unitarisation, this was perhaps looking in the wrong direction for change. Whilst reform may not be welcomed by all, central government was committed to creating unitary authorities and this was now the choice.

As Councillor Cowcher had stated, a major complexity in the choice was that the new unitary authorities needed to help unlock devolution, being the goal of the White Paper, which required universal coverage in England by strategic authorities. This was complex in the local context with several possible permutations but in terms of economic geography, Warwickshire should sit in a strategic authority with Coventry, whether that was inside or outside the WMCA. If that was possible, a single Warwickshire unitary might work, although the north and south would have the advantage of having populations about the same size as Coventry and Solihull. Alternative possibilities for strategic authorities included south Warwickshire joining a strategic authority with Oxfordshire or Worcestershire, while north Warwickshire could form a strategic authority with Staffordshire or Leicestershire. It was important that there was genuine consultation with residents and that those residents were presented with a real choice.

In conclusion, Councillor Davison asked Warwickshire County Council to work with the district and borough councils to agree what evidence should be considered in preparing the proposals. This may include the importance of economic geography, finance, residents' sense of identity and their trust in local government, and how likely non-statutory services like swimming pools and parks were to be cut.

### **Councillor Ish Mistry – Deputy Leader of Rugby Borough Council**

Councillor Mistry read a statement from Councillor Michael Moran, the Leader of Rugby Borough Council. The statement noted that the government's English devolution White Paper was published on 16 December 2024 and included the government's intention to facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for a two-tier area. On 5 February 2025, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, had written to the six Warwickshire Councils inviting them to work collaboratively to develop a proposal for local government reorganization. Subsequent briefing by government officials had clarified the intent and time scale regarding the local government reorganization. A special meeting of

Rugby Borough Council had been convened on 26 February 2025 to consider the matter. As such, the statement represented the view of the Leader and Cabinet of Rugby Borough Council only.

The statement went on to say that in response to the English Devolution White Paper, and determining the future structures for local government in Warwickshire, Rugby Borough Council's administration considered it imperative that the interests of residents, businesses and communities remained the sole driver for more streamlined and cost effective services, enabling the achievement of efficiency and better outcomes for communities. The administration recognised the specific challenges faced by Rugby Borough Council while uncertainty regarding local government restructuring remained, including but not limited to those relating to the Council's workforce, joint work with partners out in the community, resident understanding of the local government landscape, and the deliverability of corporate priorities which required long-term investment. Given these challenges, the administration understood the need to act positively and to collaborate and co-produce with all partners at the earliest opportunity, with the intent being absolute clarity and collective discussion of the creation of a new joint authority and not a takeover by Warwickshire County Council, a viewpoint which had been unhelpfully portrayed in the media.

In moving forward, the administration considered it imperative that due consideration was given to maintaining a genuine connection within all distinct communities, for example, by the new unitary authority having a physical presence in the major towns throughout the county, by ensuring that the new unitary authority had well thought out plans for engaging and involving communities and by ensuring that the role of the local council (including parish and town councils) was fully considered.

The recent commencement of discussions between the leaders and the chief executives of all six councils was welcomed. Honest, respectful, and open engagement in such discussion was essential to enable the Councils to cooperate and create an Interim Plan. The deadline for this (21 March 2025) and the deadline for the proposal (26 November 2025) was very tight.

Finally, the statement noted that the White Paper set out a clear vision to deliver devolution and local government reorganisation at pace and presented a significant opportunity for all areas to proactively self-determine the future structure of local government in Warwickshire to deliver a better outcome for all residents. If delivered effectively, this opportunity could directly benefit the residents and businesses of Rugby and Warwickshire.

### **Keith Kondakor**

Mr Kondakor expressed the view that it was not a good time to hurry into local government reform and cautioned against making mistakes through rushing.

He stated that whilst the devolution of power to appropriate levels and giving power to communities was welcomed, the proposals seemed to be doing the opposite, with decision-making powers and jobs moved away from local districts upwards to a unitary authority. The borough where he lived (Nuneaton and Bedworth) had serious need for improvement but he was not supportive of moving its powers 20 miles south and this would not necessarily solve

the problems in any event. He cited what he considered to be poor decision making at Warwickshire County Council - the Bermuda Bridge project, building at Top Farm, changes to the Fire Service – as examples of decisions being ‘done to’ the local area which he considered had not been of benefit, and demonstrated that the local area did not have a strong enough voice. Mr Kondakor noted that smaller projects were also difficult to get off the ground, giving the example of a bus stop he was trying to have sited locally and he considered this would be even more difficult to achieve if there was a single, bigger local authority to deal with. In his view, there needed to be better options on the table.

Mr Kondakor stated that the proposal for two unitary local authorities should be considered. However, if this was the preferred option, there would need to be shared services to be economically viable as services like highways needed to be delivered on a reasonably sized contract. He also extolled the virtues of having a Waste Authority that merged activities across Coventry and Warwickshire (including the districts and boroughs).

He stated that consideration would also need to be given to the where the boundaries would be drawn. For instance, he questioned if Hinkley and Bosworth could form part of a North Warwickshire Council, or if The Cotswolds could join a South Warwickshire conglomeration. However, in his view, consideration should be given to other models, eg working towards a London-style of government where a strategic authority existed alongside well-funded local councils. This made a big difference to democracy with local councils providing local services and a strategic authority providing the bigger picture. In terms of the government’s proposals for the creation of authorities with populations of 500,000 or more, having a strategic authority and unitary authority/authorities made sense. He considered that if this two tier style was supported in London, then it could be implemented elsewhere. He stated that the main issue was for the model to enhance local democracy at town and village levels and to keep decision-making and jobs and services local where possible.

Mr Kondakor noted that important services were delivered locally, such as Council Housing. In Nuneaton and Bedworth, there were 5,000 council homes and the new model would need to consider how those services would continue to be delivered. It would also be important to consider the role of civic pride and how decisions on planning could be made locally.

He urged the Council to look at the options and seek a flexible solution that preserved the best parts of local government and retained enough local councillors at different levels to serve their communities. Reflecting on his own experience, he understood the roles of both borough councillor and county councillor and the public service that was provided.

### **Councillor Alan Boad, Warwick District Council**

Councillor Boad welcomed the government’s decision to allow elections in Warwickshire to continue on 1 May 2025 and give the local councils a further eight weeks to submit an interim plan for reorganisation of local government. The proposals reached in that period would reshape local government to a form that would, in all likelihood, last another 50 years. It was also eight weeks to create a strategic authority, most likely led by an elected mayor, or to try to join another one.

He was of the view that the proposals should be jointly developed by an all-party group of councillors from the existing councils and no council should feel ‘done to’ by another since all

six councils would be abolished. However, the timescales were tight and therefore some agreed principles were needed.

Since there was a requirement to work with neighbouring authorities to identify the best solutions for the area, the County Council had to work as an equal partner, collaboratively with the districts and boroughs to arrive

At an agreed reorganisation proposal. It was also understood that the consultation was required at pace to meet the government's timeline, requiring the submission of an interim plan before 21 March 2025 and the full proposals for reorganisation by 28 November 2025. Warwick District Council believed that the consultations must start by answering three key questions:

1. What shape should the future of local government in Warwickshire take? Should there be one unitary authority for all of Warwickshire or would having two unitary authorities better serve the different communities of north and south Warwickshire? This would provide a proposal similar to the solution in Northamptonshire, which was divided into two unitary authorities formed in 2021, demonstrating that there was a precedent for reform with the population figures involved. Alternatively, should another solution be sought?
2. Should the future unitary local authorities attempt to join WMCA or work with councils from other neighbouring counties to form a new strategic authority? This was a crucial decision that had to be made, particularly given that WMCA had indicated that they did not want Warwickshire Councils to join.
3. This was supposed to be a bottom-up process, taking the opportunity to move powers down to parish and town councils. This must be addressed in this period, moving control down to the lowest possible level that could practically deliver solutions locally for local people.

Councillor Boad noted that these should not be party political matters and he supported the approach agreed at meetings of Warwick District Council and Stratford-on-Avon District Council to work on a cross-party basis and with other local councils to find the best outcome for Warwickshire's residents.

The Chairman noted that a written submission had been received from **Councillor Christopher Watkins, Leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council** which he read out as follows:

“As the Leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, I want to make it known, as I have done many times already – that I support both the principle of devolution and of local government reform. This Government’s policy gives a clear opportunity to both my Borough and the whole of Warwickshire, to transform outcomes for our residents, businesses, and visitors.

Equally I am pleased that Government rejected Warwickshire’s request to join the priority programme. In partnership with my fellow District and Borough Leaders, I made clear representations to Government; to give Warwickshire the time to undertake this work.

This time has been afforded, and on this basis, I call to all Councils around Warwickshire to come together to explore all the options available. At the forefront of my mind is the

recognition for the communities, culture and senses of places that form up our County, and we owe it to them to strive for the best model possible, putting our communities at the forefront.

I hope, that in compliment with all Local Government organisations in Warwickshire, the various options can be duly explored, to establish the right outcome for all residents of Warwickshire.”

## **2. Unitary Local Government in Warwickshire**

The Chairman advised that in common with his decision regarding the length of public speeches, he was also exercising his discretion to allow longer speeches, of up to ten minutes, from county councillors during this debate.

Councillor Isobel Seccombe, Leader, thanked the public speakers for attending to share their views and recognised the importance of those views to the debate.

In order to provide some context, Councillor Seccombe explained the activities that had taken place since the publication of the English Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024. She noted that the government’s manifesto had included devolution, but it had been a surprise that local government reform was included within its proposals. Within three days of the publication, a meeting had taken place between the Leaders and Chief Executives of Warwickshire County Council and the District and Borough Councils to consider the implications, including the government’s deadline of 10 January 2025 to request to be included in the early wave of reorganisation. This Council had determined to make a request to be included in that wave for several reasons, not least to provide some certainty for the workforce. However, this was not taken forward by government.

At this point, Councillor Seccombe noted the difference between devolution and local government reform, stating that whilst they were inevitably joined together, they were separate issues for consideration. She pointed out that Warwickshire County Council had a devolution deal in place and, beyond the debate at this meeting, there would be a discussion regarding strategic authorities, being the direction in which the government had expressed it wished to progress. However, the debate at this meeting was focussed on local government reform, a piece of work that all six local councils were working on and the final goal of this work was a single tier of local government, either one or two councils, to deliver all the current services delivered across the existing two tiers. It was important for elected members across all councils to shape and be part of delivering the best model possible for local residents, taxpayers, businesses and young people. Although the government had not chosen to take Warwickshire forward in the early wave, there was still a lot of work to take place. On the same day the government had announced that Warwickshire would not go forward in the early wave, it had indicated the requirement for the delivery of an interim plan by 21 March 2025 and full proposals by 28 November 2025. The authorities needed to work to deliver the best model it could, that encompassed the delivery of all services across the existing two tiers, that would make savings. The government had also requested that funds were not spent on consultants.

Councillor Seccombe highlighted that there was a case for change and consideration would be given to a single unitary council model which she believed was the only sustainable outcome. She

noted that some of the proposals that the government had received were tidying up small unitary councils which were fundamentally failing financially and she did not believe anyone wanted to create a system and legacy that was bound to fail.

She valued the ethos and principles of councillors working for local people and considered that a single unitary council would work across the whole geography of the area. This was not about geographic change, as services would still be delivered on a locality basis and no doubt library services, leisure services and waste services would form part of those discussions. This was a real chance to ensure that the best of each council was represented whilst reducing costs and bureaucracy.

Looking ahead to the strategic authority, there was again really only one viable model to Councillor Seccombe's mind, and this was largely because for some years councils' funds had been spent with WMCA as non-constituent members. Each of the six councils was, to varying extents, involved financially and financially indebted to the combined authority. Local businesses had also benefitted from the arrangement. There was a lot to lose by walking away from the partnership and she did not consider opening talks with other areas was an appropriate way to behave when there was already a financial obligation to WMCA. Additionally, it was inappropriate to open discussions before the unitary model was known and she believed that combined authorities would want to understand the model before entering discussions also. She asserted her view that it was important to resolve local government reform within Warwickshire and adopt a sensible approach to the strategic authority to ensure that savings could be achieved without lessening of local place-based delivery or relationships. It was vital to simplify the system for residents and businesses to access their Council and she proposed that there was only one solution for Warwickshire, that would maintain local pride in the place, valuing small communities, market towns and local hubs and centres whilst protecting the interests of all of local taxpayers.

Councillor Adrian Warwick seconded the recommendation and reserved his right to speak.

## **Amendments**

Councillor Sarah Feeney, moved the following amendment.

*“Local Government reform is not solely about unitarising two-tier councils. Government has been clear in the White Paper that devolution of power to local communities will be through the establishment of new Strategic Authorities or widening the scope of those which exist.*

*It is crucial that future unitary government is not remote from local communities. The engagement of local communities in decision-making will be essential if devolved powers are to be exercised effectively.*

*The County of Warwickshire has a strong heritage, brand and identity which should be preserved and strengthened for future generations.*

*That Council therefore:*

- 1. Supports the development of a proposal to Government for unitary local government for Warwickshire which meets the guidance, criteria and timeframes set out in the invitation received from Government*



2. *Opens discussions across the region with prospective Strategic Authority partners.*
3. *Seeks to establish clear guiding principles and rationale for proposals developed.*
4. *Seeks to involve local communities in local decision making in any proposals*
5. *Seeks to preserve the boundaries and the identity of the County in any proposals*
6. *Ensure the interim plans meet the requirements set out by the Minister of State for Local Government.”*

In moving the amendment, Councillor Feeney sought recognition that the old system of government was being abolished and there would no longer be a two tier system of local government. Whatever model was supported, whether that be one or two councils, they would be new councils and not a continuation of any other councils. This offered opportunities for new thinking and a simplified system for residents where one council would have full ownership of services and any problems residents encountered. She considered it was an amazing opportunity for residents to be at the heart of the proposals.

The Labour Group amendment spoke of involving local communities, not borough, district, town, or parish councils, because communities were the people elected members served and they were the people who needed to be involved and would need to be involved in any consultation process. Without their involvement, the reality was that there would be a struggle to persuade the public to accept the changes that were coming.

Councillor Feeney had heard the concept of North and South raised in the debate but no mention of the East, and she highlighted that Rugby often felt forgotten. Despite this there was belief in Warwickshire and the shared heritage across the County. People in Rugby shared the same hopes, fears and dreams as people resident in the north or south. They all wanted a functioning council or councils and a happy, secure and safe place to live. To an extent, she did not believe they minded what the model was, or the crest that was printed on their bins as long as the services were delivered and bins collected.

Looking ahead to the conversations that were needed in the coming weeks, the focus had to be on what was achievable for communities and residents. She had various proposals mooted about which councils or geographic areas to encompass as part of reorganisation. However, those areas already had their own visions and boundaries. This was not a blank piece of paper to start over. She did not think local government would look the way it did if there was a do-over and there would be lots of things that would be done differently. But that was not what was happening and the reality was that consideration needed to be given to what was possible for Warwickshire.

Councillor Feeney wanted to open discussions across the county with all stakeholders to make sure that everybody was engaged, with clear guiding principles and a rationale for the proposals. She felt that there was lot of different ideas being mooted at the present time and it was important to reach a common agreement.

She also emphasised the need to be part of a strategic authority as this would be the gateway to devolution and provide the ability to have more control of, for example, health, transport and

railways. It was important to be ambitious for Warwickshire and whether the end result was one or two unitary authorities, she hoped everyone agreed that elected members wanted a solution that would best serve residents.

Councillor John Holland seconded the amendment and reserved his right to speak.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse proposed the following amendment:

*“That Council supports the development of a proposal to Government for unitary local government for Warwickshire which meets the guidance, criteria and timeframes set out in the invitation received from Government.*

*Warwickshire County Council endorses working with Councils at all levels across Warwickshire to explore the options for appropriate service delivery models for unitary status and considering the views of residents,*

*Council requests that consideration is given to:*

- 1. Protecting the level of services currently delivered to the community by District, Borough, Town, Parish Councils.*
- 2. The geography, population and economic and community footprint of Warwickshire.*
- 3. Warwickshire’s relationships with its neighbours.*
- 4. The creation of town & parish councils where there are none.*
- 5. Views on which strategic authority the Council would be best to look at aligning with; and*
- 6. A high level cross party working group be established to support this work.”*

In moving the amendment, Councillor Roodhouse noted the commonality of language being used. Whilst there were different communities being represented, everyone wanted what was best for them and he believed it was important to keep this central in discussions. Councillor Roodhouse likened the task ahead as being like receiving a gift, which when unwrapped was a 3000 piece jigsaw with many of the pieces being the same colour. It took a long time to complete jigsaws of this type and the task ahead was very similar and it was important to ensure that all the right pieces, including devolution, were put together in the right places.

Councillor Roodhouse recalled the concept of ‘evidence judgement impact’, wherein as much evidence should be gathered from as many people as possible from as many sources as possible (partners, stakeholders, other local authorities, good examples of service delivery, best practice, etc) and then collectively try and come to a judgement over the particular elements as a way forward and think of the impact that that would have on residents in the end. In doing so, it was important to respect the views of each other.

He also noted that this was a top-down process, a process that was forced on local authorities, whether it was welcomed or not. At the same time, government was making other commitments around expenditure on defence, welfare and the NHS, but there was no commitment to increase

funding for local government. Local government was good at service delivery within the budgets made available and this meant that the Treasury generally considered it was possible to make more savings. For instance, the Better Care Fund had been frozen for around three years and the impact would be on hospital discharge services. However, gathering evidence, making good judgements and looking at impacts through the process of reorganisation, it may be possible to resolve some of these issues including council tax equalisation.

In conclusion, he welcomed the debate but asked for the opportunity to discuss around a table and find a solution that recognised the evidence judgement impact. He emphasised that the focus of the debate was serving residents and this was an opportunity to create a legacy for the future. At the same time, it was important to be realistic and recognise the process for what it was: a top-down process that included a government consultation rather than a discussion with local people.

Councillor Sarah Boad seconded the amendment.

The Chairman asked Councillor Seccombe if the amendments were recognised as friendly and, in recognition of the similar language being used in the amendments, she requested an adjournment to engage with the proposers of the amendments and reach a collaborative response.

*The meeting adjourned at 10.56am and reconvened at 11.35am.*

Councillor Seccombe advised the Chairman that she now proposed a new motion which was seconded by Councillor Sarah Feeney.

*“The Labour Government, through the Devolution White Paper, has directed all two-tier Local Authority areas shall become Unitary Councils by 2028. Consultation will be undertaken by the Secretary of State through their department.*

*It is crucial that future Unitary Government is not remote from local communities and engagement with them is embedded within future structures.*

*The County of Warwickshire has a strong heritage and identity which should be preserved and strengthened for future generations.*

*The Council therefore:*

- 1. Will develop a proposal to Government for unitary local government for Warwickshire which meets the guidance, criteria and time frames set out by Government.*
- 2. Seeks to quickly establish clarity from Government regarding the model to be progressed to enable the best use of time and resource.*
- 3. Commits to engage with Districts, Boroughs, Towns, Parishes and Communities in developing proposals, both existing and future emerging arrangements.*
- 4. Recognises the importance of the boundary and the identity of the County of Warwickshire in any proposals and will work with regional partners.*
- 5. Will continue to strive for the economic prosperity of the area even against adverse national headwinds.*
- 6. Agrees to establish a cross-party working group to support this work.”*

Councillor Martin Watson brought Members' attention to an amendment to the text on the printed version of the new motion that had been circulated prior to the meeting reconvening. As it was impossible to 'ensure' prosperity, the motion on screen, which Members would be asked to vote on, stated that the Council would 'strive' for economic prosperity.

## **Debate**

During the course of the debate, the following points were raised:

- Public speakers were thanked for attending to share their views.
- It was considered that the motion provided a framework to develop a solution that was right for Warwickshire,
- The proposal to appoint a cross-party working group was supported. Given the amount of work that was required, some Members advocated for a high-level cross-party working group.
- The interim plan required by government did not require a preferred option to be stated at this stage, but it did require the plan of work to come to a decision to be laid out. It would be important to develop a wide evidence base for a preferred option.
- The government had already considered workable solutions to creating unitary councils and this had resulted in the development of guidelines around creating authorities that covered populations of a minimum of 500,000 along existing boundaries which showed a regard for heritage and civil communities.
- It was noted that the motion referenced becoming unitary by the year 2028, but it was pointed out that the government's timetable was already slipping. Of the priority groups identified in the first wave, it appeared that only Surrey were moving forward, meaning that it was likely implementation for the other priorities would slip. This could mean that implementation in Warwickshire could be 2029 or beyond.
- The need to make a positive difference to local people's lives through this process was emphasised.
- The simplification of residents being able to access services through one council was identified as a benefit of unitary local government, which was supported by the experience of Members who had simultaneously been county and district/borough councillors as opposed to that of Members who were councillors in one tier but not the other.
- The wisdom of creating two unitary authorities was questioned, and what this would mean, in particular, for the provision of adult social care, children's services, SEND services and the Fire Service where work had recently concluded on providing efficiencies to deliver service improvement. It was considered that creating two unitary authorities would limit the economies of scale which would bring efficiencies for a single unitary council. It was further noted by some Members that the government's proposals were to create unitary authorities of populations of 500,000 or more which it was suggested prohibited the possibility of creating two unitary authorities in any event and some Members suggested that no exceptional circumstances had

been identified to deviate from this guideline. It was, however, appreciated that some services would benefit from localised service delivery which could be delivered through a single unitary authority.

- Whilst some Members considered that more co-operative delivery of services would provide improvements for residents, others expressed suspicion with the experience of Cornwall being used as an example. It was explained that although unitarisation had eventually made savings for the unitary council that had emerged in Cornwall, it had not necessarily been so for the taxpayer, resulting in the reversion to district-style councils over time. It was noted that there were other areas (eg Somerset, Wiltshire, Cornwall, Shropshire and Cumbria) with unitarisation experiences which could also inform the evidence base. In the instance of Cumbria, two small unitary authorities had been created, which had then come together to create a strategic authority and this was a further option that could be considered for Warwickshire.
- The similarities between communities, but difference in localities was recognised along with the importance of local voices. A number of Members emphasised the need for local decision making by councillors with local knowledge, reflecting on the prior role of Area Committees.
- The retention of town and parish councils and their creation in Nuneaton and Bedworth and Rugby where they did not currently exist was supported. However, it was suggested that a dialogue with existing town and parish councils would need to be opened to understand how they would fit into a unitary model and what devolved powers parish and town councils could, or would like to, take on. The civic pride associated with town mayors was also noted.
- Noting the difference in council tax paid by Band D homeowners across the county and the higher populations in North Warwickshire, Nuneaton and Bedworth, and Rugby where a lower proportion of total council tax was paid, it was noted that significant work in this area would be required to bring the tax bases together.
- The strong economic links with Coventry and Solihull were highlighted as a reason to remain associated with WMCA rather than seek to create a strategic authority elsewhere. It was noted that some Warwickshire residents would also have personal links with these areas.
- Further information about funding formulas was highlighted as important to ensure that savings made in Warwickshire remained in Warwickshire rather than being redistributed to neighbouring authorities.
- The top-down approach to local government reorganisation was criticised, particularly for the use of government consultation rather than local councils running a consultation and the final decision on the submissions resting with central government. The value of locally led consultation was illustrated through the Resourcing to Risk consultation for Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service where proposals had been amended following consultation feedback.
- Government were also criticised for not understanding that the majority of the people that the council served were older people, people with special needs or children and not 'working people' as Angela Raynor had recently been quoted.

- Government were further criticised for the timing of local government reorganisation in light of delays to adult social care reform which would see a continual drain on county finances and savings required from non-statutory services. It was, therefore, important that any unitary proposals considered the legacy for the new council so that important universal services could be retained.
- Criticism was also levelled at the government's short timescales for the development of proposals which limited time to gather evidence rather than make assumptions and estimates. Conversely, Members were reminded of the work that was done at pace during the Covid-19 pandemic and urged not to fear the speed at which the work needed to be completed.
- Members were urged to be mindful of the Nolan principles and the importance of being open and transparent with the public about what it was possible to achieve whilst providing reassurance rather than misinformation.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Feeney thanked Members for their comments and the clear sense that it was the future that was under discussion, even if there was not yet agreement about what the future looked like. That agreement would hopefully come through the work of the cross-party working group. She noted discussion about savings, but she wanted to focus on reinvestment into services instead and the money that would go back into services to support the elderly and children whether that was through one unitary council or two.

Councillor Feeney reflected on the history of debate on unitary status in Warwickshire and how its value had long been recognised. She considered that the debate at this meeting had demonstrated the benefits of talking to find ways to accommodate differing viewpoints. She also supported calls for proposals to be backed by evidence and an understanding of the different arguments and how the numbers stacked up.

She also noted the sense of pride in place that had come through in the debate and moving forward it would be important to think about how place was considered and how the public felt and whether they had been listened to.

In conclusion, she considered the White Paper provided opportunities to make improvements for residents through the creation of a new council.

In reply to the debate, Councillor Secombe thanked public speakers and Members for their welcome contributions. She recognised the passionate response to the topic and hoped the Motion would provide a way to deal with what could be realistically achieved through an evidence based approach. The Council had a successful track record of delivering successful services based on evidence.

She asked colleagues to put their passions aside and understand the impact of this work because it was this that would leave a legacy that would affect Warwickshire residents for years to come. She encouraged reading the government's English Devolution White Paper to understand what councillors were being asked to do. The reality was that if services such as adult social care, children's services and SEND services were split they would not be able to achieve the high standards required to manage increasing costs. In particular, the placement of children's services into a Trust, which was a likely outcome of a two unitary model, should be avoided as this would limit control on service delivery.

Councillor Seccombe recognised the fantastic workforce at the Council and believed that the ability to attract the brightest and best employees to help shape the future, was to ensure that the workforce was confident in its elected members to create a sensible and pragmatic solution for the future of Warwickshire.

Councillor Seccombe also expressed her fundamental agreement that the future for a unitary council in Warwickshire lay with the WMCA, which had already delivered enormous value for the economy, for the workforce and the skills within the region. She cited the Investment Zone as an example which had created 9,000 new jobs, investment of £90 million pounds and the potential for businesses to thrive on the back of being an investment zone. She questioned if it was sensible to walk away from that.

In conclusion, Councillor Seccombe recognised that there was a lot of work to do at pace and she wanted to know from government what the next steps were after the submission of an Interim Plan on 21 March 2025 because she recognised that there was no time to waste. She urged colleagues to move forward together to make Warwickshire great.

### **Vote**

A vote was held and the motion was unanimously supported.

### **Resolved**

The Labour Government, through the Devolution White Paper, has directed all two-tier Local Authority areas shall become Unitary Councils by 2028. Consultation will be undertaken by the Secretary of State through their department.

It is crucial that future Unitary Government is not remote from local communities and engagement with them is embedded within future structures.

The County of Warwickshire has a strong heritage and identity which should be preserved and strengthened for future generations.

The Council therefore:

2. Will develop a proposal to Government for unitary local government for Warwickshire which meets the guidance, criteria and time frames set out by Government.
3. Seeks to quickly establish clarity from Government regarding the model to be progressed to enable the best use of time and resource.
4. Commits to engage with Districts, Boroughs, Towns, Parishes and Communities in developing proposals, both existing and future emerging arrangements.
5. Recognises the importance of the boundary and the identity of the County of Warwickshire in any proposals and will work with regional partners.
7. Will continue to strive for the economic prosperity of the area even against adverse national headwinds.
8. Agrees to establish a cross-party working group to support this work.

The meeting ended at 12.54pm

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Chair