

Cabinet

6 March 2025

Unitary Local Government in Warwickshire – Submission of Interim Plan

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1. Authorises the submission to Government of an Interim Plan for unitary local government for Warwickshire by 21st March 2025 based on the outline set out at Appendix 1; and
2. Authorises the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to finalise the Interim Plan for submission to Government.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 On 16th December 2024 the Government published the English Devolution White Paper, setting out its ambition for both devolution and Local Government reform.
- 1.2 Subsequently on 5th February 2025 the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to the Leaders of the six Councils in Warwickshire to invite them officially to work together to develop a joint submission with proposal(s) for local government reorganisation in their area. The letter constitutes a statutory invitation which the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has issued in exercise of powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.
- 1.3 The invitation sets out guidance for the development of any proposals and the criteria against which proposals will be assessed. It also sets out the timeline for the process, namely that an interim plan be submitted by 21st March 2025, followed by full proposals to be submitted by 28th November 2025.
- 1.4 The letter and supporting material were presented as part of a report to full Council on 18th February 2025 when the issue of unitary local government for Warwickshire was debated. The resolution agreed by the Council is attached at Appendix 2.
- 1.5 This paper presents the Council's proposed outline submission to Government at Appendix 1 and seeks Cabinet authority for the submission to be finalised by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council and submitted by the Government's deadline of 21st March 2025.

- 1.6 In formulating the outline submission regard has been had to the debate at full Council on 18th February 2025. In addition, the Cross-Party Member Group (established following full Council) has now been established. By the time of submission, the working group will have met on two occasions and its representations will help to inform the final Interim Plan submission. Thereafter the cross-party working group will play an important part in developing the detailed, final proposals for submission by 28th November 2025.
- 1.7 The approach to the submission of interim plans has also been discussed with the Leaders and Chief Executives of the five Warwickshire District & Borough Councils. It has been agreed that interim plans will be submitted to Government within a single Warwickshire 'envelope' regardless of how many interim plans are compiled, and whether they are competing.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 Implementing unitary government for Warwickshire will have significant financial implications, both in terms of transition and transformation costs and long-term future savings. Overall, it is expected that the long-term scenario will be one of reduced costs.
- 2.2 Indicative, initial estimation of these financial implications forms part of the Interim Plan requirements. Detail can be seen at Appendix 1. The financial implications will continue to be evaluated as the detailed proposals develop in readiness for submission in November 2025.

3. Environmental Implications

- 3.1 Environmental considerations will be a key element of the development of the Interim Plan and the full proposals and will be evaluated throughout the process.

4. Supporting Information

- 4.1 The invitation from the Minister sets out what Government expects to see included in Interim Plans. This includes a schedule with guidance for proposals for unitary local government. The schedule includes the following headline criteria for unitary government:
1. A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
 2. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks (population of 500,000 or more).
 3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable

- public services to citizens.
4. Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views
 5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
 6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment
- 4.2 In addition, the invitation letter set out that Interim Plans should:
- 4.2.1 identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful.
 - 4.2.2 identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities.
 - 4.2.3 include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for future service transformation opportunities.
 - 4.2.4 include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance.
 - 4.2.5 include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions.
 - 4.2.6 include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals.
 - 4.2.7 set out indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area.
 - 4.2.8 set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forward and to help balance the decisions needed now to maintain service delivery and ensure value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area.
- 4.3 For each criterion and requirement set out in the invitation letter, the template attached at Appendix 1 contains key messages and principles to shape the final elements of the Interim Plan. This is also a reflection of the rationale and evidence available at this stage in the development of the Interim Plan.
- 4.4 An early assessment of how each criterion is met is included in Appendix 1 with reference to:
- a. a single unitary model for Warwickshire based on the current county footprint; and
 - b. a two unitary model based on a North Warwickshire (Rugby, Nuneaton & Bedworth, North Warwickshire) and a South Warwickshire (Stratford and Warwick).

- 4.5 These two models are considered to be the only viable options. However, as can be seen at Appendix 1, the early assessment against the Government criteria leans towards a single unitary Council for Warwickshire as the model which most closely meets the Government's criteria.
- 4.6 The themes that have been drawn out in the Interim Plan also reflect the following themes from the Government's English Devolution White Paper;
- 4.6.1 the focus on delivering services at neighbourhood and community levels and local decision-making;
 - 4.6.2 delivering better outcomes for local residents;
 - 4.6.3 ensuring accountable local government;
 - 4.6.4 delivering efficient and sustainable local government;
 - 4.6.5 driving delivery of savings;
 - 4.6.6 driving reform of public services with a strong focus on prevention; and
 - 4.6.7 promoting economic growth and prosperity.
- 4.7 At the time of writing, it is not clear what happens immediately following submission of interim plans. This does not constitute a Government decision or evaluation point. However, it is expected that Government will provide feedback which will help to inform development of a full business case for submission by 28th November 2025.
- 4.8 In undertaking detailed work and collating additional evidence for the full business case, it will be essential to engage with stakeholders, partners, staff and Warwickshire residents during the process.
- 4.10 In respect of the Council's public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010, it is considered there are no specific equalities implications arising from this report. It may be that such implications arise as this matter proceeds, particularly in the formulation of the more detailed proposals, but they will be assessed and considered as appropriate at that time. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is an appendix to this report.

5. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

- 5.1 Subject to Cabinet's approval of the recommendation in this report, the Interim Plan will be finalised and submitted to Government by 21st March 2025. In the interests of transparency and close working, the Interim Plan will be shared with colleagues in Warwickshire District and Borough Councils at that time.
- 5.2 Further work, including the collation of a detailed evidence base, will then be undertaken to prepare full proposal(s) for single unitary government in Warwickshire for submission by 28th November 2025.
- 5.3 Between the submission of the Interim Plan and submission of the detailed proposals in November, engagement will be undertaken and views sought from the following:
- 5.3.1 Warwickshire County Council cross-party Member Working Group;

- 5.3.2 Warwickshire District and Borough Council Leaders;
- 5.3.3 Town & Parish Councils through the standing reference group;
- 5.3.4 Stakeholders including ICB, CWPT, SWUFT, UHCW, Police, OPCC, Universities and FE sector, VCSE;
- 5.3.5 Council staff and Trade Unions; and
- 5.3.6 the Voice of Warwickshire residents' panel.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Outline Interim Plan Submission

Appendix 2 – Resolution of full Council – 18th February 2025

Appendix 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): N/a countywide matter

Other members: N/a