

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

12TH MARCH 2025, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors S. Ammar (Chairman), B. Kumar (Vice-Chairman), A. Bailes, R. Bailes, S. J. Baxter, S. R. Colella, A. M. Dale, J. Elledge, S. M. Evans, D. J. A. Forsythe, E. M. S. Gray, C.A. Hotham, D. Hopkins, R. J. Hunter, H. J. Jones, K.J. May, P. M. McDonald, B. McEldowney, S. T. Nock, D. J. Nicholl, S. R. Peters, J. Robinson, S. A. Robinson, H. D. N. Rone-Clarke, J. D. Stanley, K. Taylor, S. A. Webb and P. J. Whittaker

Officers: Mrs. S. Hanley, Mr P. Carpenter, Mr. G. Revans, Mrs. C. Felton, Ms. N Cummings and Mrs. J. Bayley-Hill

102\24 **TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors J. Clarke, R. Lambert and M. Marshall.

103\24 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors K. May, J. Robinson and S. Webb all declared other disclosable interests in Minute Item no. 105/24 – Local Government Reorganisation - Interim Plan Proposals for Worcestershire – Bromsgrove - in their capacity as Worcestershire County Councillors.

Councillor K. Taylor declared an other disclosable interest in Minute Item no. 105/24 – Local Government Reorganisation – Interim Plan Proposals for Worcestershire – Bromsgrove - in his capacity as both a Worcestershire County Councillor and as Chairman of the Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority.

They all remained present during consideration of this item and took part in both the debate and voted thereon.

104\24 **TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COUNCIL HELD ON 19TH FEBRUARY 2025**

The minutes of the meeting of Council held on 19th February 2025 were submitted.

Reference was made to the discussions in respect of the Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28, which had occurred during that meeting. A request was made for clarification to be provided that the Liberal Democrat group had sought to submit an alternative budget for consideration but had not been able to get this over the line in time for the meeting.

RESOLVED that subject to the amendment detailed in the preamble above, the minutes of the Council meeting held on 19th February 2025 be approved as a true and correct record.

105\24

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RE-ORGANISATION - INTERIM PLAN PROPOSALS FOR WORCESTERSHIRE - BROMSGROVE

The Leader of the Council presented a report concerning Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution in terms of the Interim Plan Proposals for Worcestershire.

Members were informed that on the 5th February 2025, Jim McMahon MP, the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, wrote to the Leaders of the six District Councils and the County Council in Worcestershire setting out the Government's vision for local government and the transfer of power out of Westminster through devolution. The letter invited the Worcestershire authorities to work together to formulate and submit an interim plan for a single tier of local government, in line with the guidance appended to the letter, on or before 21st March 2025, with an expectation that a full proposal would be submitted by 28th November 2025.

The Leader expressed regret that the Council was having to consider this matter. However, the Leader recognised that there was a need for the Council to positively engage with the process to ensure the very best outcomes for the residents of Bromsgrove District.

With this in mind, discussions had been taking place between the Leader and the other Worcestershire Council Leaders, supported by the Chief Executives from all seven Worcestershire Councils through the Worcestershire Leaders Board. The focus had been to prepare the draft interim plan that had been provided for Members' consideration at the Council meeting in Appendix 5 to the report, which set out draft proposals covering the County as a whole. This was in line with the Government's expectation that this draft interim plan would then be subject to agreement by each of the Councils in Worcestershire and form the basis of the Worcestershire interim submission.

Council was asked to note that at this stage, the authority did not have enough information to make a determination on the most appropriate structure one way or the other. This was reinforced by the District S151 Officers' Statement in Appendix 5 to the report. However, it was clear that in order to make a final proposal, there was a plethora of information and data that the Council would need to consider and validate before a final submission could be considered and determined in November 2025. It was for this reason, that the interim proposal did not favour one model above another.

In this context, the Leader proposed that, having considered the information provided in the report, the third option listed at

recommendation 2 of the report should be endorsed, alongside recommendation 3 and a fourth recommendation that had been proposed for Members' consideration in an addendum to the report that had been published in a supplementary pack for the meeting.

These recommendations were proposed by Councillor K. May and seconded by Councillor S. Baxter.

In considering this matter, Members noted that there were three options available:

- Option 1 – One Unitary Authority for the whole of Worcestershire.
- Option 2 – Two Unitary Authorities, one for North Worcestershire, covering Bromsgrove District, Redditch Borough and Wyre Forest District and one for South Worcestershire, covering Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wychavon District.
- Option 3 – A response that continued to work up Options 1 and 2 to ensure that both could be fully examined prior to the final submission to Government in November 2025.

Clarification was provided that the Interim Plan, that had been prepared by the seven Chief Executives in Worcestershire and considered at a recent meeting of Worcestershire Leaders' Board, was proposing that Option 3 should be taken forward at this stage. The Leader was similarly proposing that Option 3 should be endorsed, alongside the Interim Plan, at this stage.

During consideration of this item, Councillor C. Hotham proposed an amendment to the proposals. The amendment was worded as follows:

“Council notes that:-

Whilst the Council has had late sight of the PwC report commissioned by Worcestershire County Council, it has not had sight of the underlying assumptions upon which it is based. It is not therefore possible at this stage to identify the most favourable option for Bromsgrove District Council. This is contrary to the Minister's request in his letter of the 5th February that Councils work collaboratively.

Council therefore resolves that:-

Based on the information currently available, the Council's preferred option at this stage would be for a North Worcestershire Unitary Council and a South Worcestershire Unitary Council.

In light of the Government's requirement for a collaborative approach the Council will endorse the Interim Plan as set out in Appendix 5.”

The amendment was proposed by Councillor C. Hotham and seconded by Councillor R. Bailes.

In proposing the amendment, Councillor Hotham commented that he felt that on balance a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority would be the best option for the people of Bromsgrove moving forward. Councillor Hotham expressed disappointment that Worcestershire County Council had not shared the report it had commissioned from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) until earlier in the week, resulting in the paper having only been issued to Bromsgrove Members in a Background Papers pack the day before the Extraordinary Council meeting. Members were asked to note that the amendment still proposed that the interim plan that had been prepared by Worcestershire Leaders Board should be endorsed, so did not commit the Council to a particular option. However, the amendment provided an opportunity for Members to articulate a preferred option at this stage, based on information available to date. The amendment highlighted concerns about the extent to which Worcestershire County Council was collaborating with other Councils in Worcestershire, as required in the Government's guidance. Councillor Hotham suggested that the amendment also clearly articulated a position that demonstrated that the Council was not in agreement with Worcestershire County Council in terms of submitting the PwC's report to Government.

In seconding the amendment, Councillor R. Bailes commented that she felt that the report that had been presented for Members' consideration was biased towards a single Unitary Authority. It was suggested that this bias, although not explicitly stated, could be detected as unconscious bias. Members were advised that Councillor Bailes had spoken to her residents about Local Government Reorganisation and they had all preferred a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority, due to the local focus corresponding with local geography and economic activity. Councillor Bailes commented that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to work with other Councils, however, she expressed disappointment that in her view this did not appear to be happening. In particular, Councillor Bailes cited concerns in respect of the report from PwC which, as it had been commissioned by Worcestershire County Council unilaterally, she suggested demonstrated that the County Council was not working with the other Councils in Worcestershire. Councillor Bailes also expressed concerns about some of the matters that had been left out of the PwC's report. Based on this, and the information currently available, the amendment had been brought forward to enable Members to express a preference at this time.

Following the presentation of the amendment, Members discussed the matter in detail and in doing so noted that this was an important Extraordinary Council meeting, as the focus was on the future of local government in Worcestershire. The suggestion was made that Members needed to ensure that any final decisions on a preferred option, in terms of future Unitary Authority structure in Worcestershire, should be based on clear evidence and data. Some Members commented that there had been insufficient time since Leaders received a letter from the Government on 5th February 2025 to gather the full range of data necessary to enable a final decision to be taken at this

stage. Indeed, it was noted that no final decision was needed until November 2025, when it was anticipated that Members would be in a position to make more informed decisions on this subject.

Consideration was given to the inclusion of reference to a preferred option in the amendment, of a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority. Whilst it was acknowledged that the amendment still proposed that Option 3 should be endorsed, some Members expressed concerns that this could be viewed as predetermination which could influence the work of any external organisation(s) that might be commissioned to undertake review work in respect of this matter on behalf of the Council and / or all Councils in Worcestershire. However, in response to this point, some Councillors highlighted that Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wyre Forest District Councils had all expressed a preference at recent Council meetings, although this was before the interim plan had been published, and Worcestershire County Council had highlighted a clear favoured option for that authority in their report on this subject, due to be considered at their Cabinet meeting on 20th March 2025. In this context, some Members questioned why Bromsgrove District Council should not also express a preference at this stage.

Members subsequently discussed the different approaches to considering this matter that had been adopted at each of the Councils in Worcestershire. Clarification was provided that as sovereign authorities, each Council had determined how they would approach consideration of this matter. Malvern Hills District, Redditch Borough, Worcester City and Wychavon District were all due to consider their interim responses at Council meetings scheduled to take place in March. Worcestershire County Council would consider an interim response at a Cabinet meeting, which would be pre-scrutinised at a meeting of their Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board. Wyre Forest District Council had already determined its position at a Council meeting held in February 2025, through discussion of a Motion on Notice.

Option 3 was discussed in some detail. Members noted that this option would enable the Council to best achieve value for money, by assessing the evidence that would be gathered and then enabling Members to make an informed decision on that basis. The suggestion was made that the Council needed to be able to demonstrate to residents and other local stakeholders, when a final decision was taken, that this had been made based on all the data available. It was noted that the amendment still incorporated this option, however, some Members expressed concerns that the inclusion of a preference in the amendment detracted from that option. Furthermore, some Members suggested that there was a need to remain open minded and to continue to contribute to discussions around both options of unitary authority, in order to ensure that the final unitary authority structure in Worcestershire, whatever that might be, best met the interests of Bromsgrove residents.

During consideration of this item, concerns were raised that there was a lot of misinformation at present circulating in the community in respect of

the implications of Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution for Bromsgrove District. Members highlighted that this appeared to have been exacerbated by preparation for the forthcoming County Council elections in which some communications had been issued suggesting that there was a risk that Bromsgrove would become part of a greater Birmingham combined authority if a single Unitary Authority was not introduced for Worcestershire. Members commented that this was disinformation, with it being noted that there were no plans for the boundaries of the existing West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to be expanded. Concerns were also raised that this form of disinformation was creating anxiety within the local community regarding Local Government Reorganisation and devolution.

Many Members noted that they were keen for the final Unitary Authority structure to have a local focus. Concerns were raised that a Unitary Authority representing a larger geographical boundary might struggle to achieve this local focus. In addition, concerns were raised that many Councillors in the north of the County had limited knowledge of or involvement with the south of the county and vice versa and some Members suggested that Bromsgrove would lose influence in a Unitary Authority serving the whole of the county.

Reference was made to research that had already been undertaken with respect to the size of local authorities by the District Councils Network (DCN). This had reached a number of favourable conclusions in relation to smaller local authorities. The point was also made that some existing Unitary Authorities representing smaller populations than 500,000 were operating successfully. However, it was also noted that the Government's English Devolution White Paper had highlighted an expectation that Unitary Authorities would generally represent a population of circa 500,000, although a smaller population would be considered in certain circumstances.

Concerns were raised about the extent to which it would be appropriate to identify a preferred option at this stage in the process when no formal public consultation had been undertaken to ascertain the views of local residents and other stakeholders. In response, some Members noted that they had already been holding informal discussions with their residents and that they were finding that a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority tended to be the preferred option.

The report that had been commissioned from PwC by Worcestershire County Council was discussed in detail. Members expressed disappointment that Worcestershire County Council had not chosen to share the report at an earlier stage. Furthermore, concerns were raised that, despite multiple requests for the information, Worcestershire County Council had not shared the assumptions or the terms of reference underpinning the PwC report. It was suggested that this made it difficult for Members to assess the value of this document.

Reference was made to the pay back period that had been recorded in the PwC's report and Members questioned the accuracy of this information. In the report, Members noted that it had been assumed that pay back applied over a period of 11 years. However, in other research papers reviewing pay back for unitarisation in other parts of the country, pay back had been assumed over a standard period of three to five years.

Concerns were raised that this report from the PwC would be submitted by Worcestershire County Council to the Government at the interim plan stage and that this might be viewed as representative of the views of all Councils in Worcestershire. However, Members were informed that this would only form part of Worcestershire County Council's response and would not be submitted as part of Bromsgrove District Council's response at this stage in the process.

Reference was made to the differences of opinion that existed across the county in respect of future Local Government Reorganisation. The suggestion was made that if the Council identified a preference at this stage in the process, it would undermine criticisms of bias in the PwC report, as Bromsgrove District Council would also then be favouring a particular option. Whilst Members might have personal preferences, the suggestion was made that all options should continued to be considered for now and that at the end of the process, in November, decisions would need to be made based on facts. It was further noted that whilst all seven Councils would be submitting their final proposals in November 2025, ultimately the Government would be making the decision about the future structure of local government in Worcestershire.

The population statistics that had been provided in the report were also considered. Members expressed concerns that these figures appeared to have not taken into account all the factors that could potentially influence population growth. The suggestion was made that more accurate figures, based on a range of sources of information, should be obtained in the following stage of the process and these might provide a different picture in terms of estimating the potential size of the populations that would be served by North and South Worcestershire Unitary Authorities.

Questions were raised as to why the amendment was still proposing endorsing Option 3 in the report when the preference stated in the amendment seemed to align more closely with Option 2. Clarification was provided by Councillor Hotham that a preference of a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority was being included based on information available to date. However, the proposal to endorse Option 3 would enable the Council to keep its options open by investigating both scenarios further. This would ensure that the Council would not be committing to any particular path at this stage.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 18.3 a recorded vote was taken on this amendment.

Members voting FOR the amendment:

Councillors S. Ammar, A. Bailes, R. Bailes, S. Colella, S. Evans, C. Hotham, R. Hunter, D. Nicholl, J. Robinson and S. Robinson (10).

Members voting AGAINST the amendment:

Councillors S. Baxter, A. Dale, J. Elledge, D. Forsythe, E. Gray, D. Hopkins, H. Jones, B. Kumar, K. May, P. McDonald, S. Nock, S. Peters, H. Rone-Clarke, J. Stanley, K. Taylor, S. Webb and P. Whittaker (17).

Members ABSTAINING in the vote on the amendment:

Councillor B. McEldowney (1).

Therefore, the vote on the amendment was defeated.

The Substantive Motion, proposed by Councillor May, was subsequently the subject of a recorded vote in accordance with Procedure Rule 18.3.

Members voting FOR the resolutions:

Councillors A. Bailes, R. Bailes, S. Baxter, S. Colella, A. Dale, J. Elledge, D. Forsythe, E. Gray, D. Hopkins, C. Hotham, H. Jones, B. Kumar, K. May, P. McDonald, B. McEldowney, S. Nock, H. Rone-Clarke, J. Stanley, K. Taylor, S. Webb and P. Whittaker (21).

Members voting AGAINST the resolutions:

Councillors S. Ammar, S. Evans, R. Hunter, D. Nicholl, S. Peters, J. Robinson and S. Robinson (7).

Members ABSTAINING in the vote on the resolutions:

No councillors (0).

The vote on the resolutions was therefore carried.

RESOLVED that

- 1) The following model of local government re-organisation be included in the Council's interim response to be sent to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government setting out the Council's position on devolution:**

OPTION 3: A response that continues to work up Option 1 (a single unitary authority for Worcestershire made up of the six District Councils and Worcestershire County Council) and Option 2 (two Unitary Authorities for North Worcestershire, covering the footprint of Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre

Forest, and South Worcestershire, covering the footprint of Malvern Hills, Worcester and Wychavon) to ensure that both can be fully examined prior to submission on 28th November 2025.

- 2) That the Interim Plan, which identified two options for a unitary structure in Worcestershire, be adopted as the Council's interim plan response. This should be sent to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government setting out the Council's position on local government re-organisation and devolution.
- 3) Authority be delegated to the Chief Executive and the Assistant Director of Legal Democratic and Procurement Services to make any final amendments to the Council's interim plan response following consultation with Group Leaders

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TO CONSIDER ANY URGENT BUSINESS, DETAILS OF WHICH HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED TO THE HEAD OF LEGAL, DEMOCRATIC AND PROCUREMENT SERVICES PRIOR TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE MEETING AND WHICH THE CHAIRMAN, BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, CONSIDERS TO BE OF SO URGENT A NATURE THAT IT CANNOT WAIT UNTIL THE NEXT MEETING

There was no urgent business for consideration on this occasion.

The meeting closed at 7.37 p.m.

Chairman