

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

WEDNESDAY 3RD SEPTEMBER 2025, AT 6.00 P.M.

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

Observers:

Officers: Mr J. Leach, Mr B. Watson, Mrs. C. Felton,
Mr. G. Revans and Mrs J. Gresham

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TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors J. Elledge, S. Evans, D. Forsythe and J. Stanley for this meeting.

A Standards matter was raised during consideration of this item. The Vice-Chairman in the Chair suggested this matter be discussed with the Monitoring Officer outside of the meeting.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION REPORT - MUTUAL VENTURES

The Leader presented Local Government Reorganisation Report - Mutual Ventures for Members' consideration. In doing so, it was noted that the purpose of the report was to provide the outcome of an options appraisal carried out by Mutual Ventures on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

The report and associated appendices considered two main options for LGR in Worcestershire.

Option A: One unitary authority for the whole of Worcestershire.

Option B: presented as options B1 and B2 considered the creation of two unitary authorities made up of North Worcestershire (covering Bromsgrove District, Redditch Borough and Wyre Forest District) and South Worcestershire (covering Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wychavon District).

It was reported that option B consisted of two variants, detailed as follows:

Option B1 provided for two unitary councils to be established across Worcestershire; North Worcestershire and South Worcestershire. It involved the disaggregation and transferring of all statutory and non-statutory services, functions and operating model from Worcestershire County Council to the new unitary councils and the aggregation and transfer of all statutory and non-statutory services, functions and operating models from district Councils to their respective new (north or south) unitary Council.

Option B2 provided two unitary Councils established across Worcestershire; North Worcestershire and South Worcestershire. This option offered a shared service/hybrid model across both new unitary Councils, with specific services (i.e. Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Education, Adult Education and Transport) jointly delivered and commissioned. All other services would be delivered and commissioned by each new unitary Council, including prevention and early help. It was noted that the exact arrangement would be determined during the development of any future full LGR proposal.

Members were reminded that on 5th February 2025 the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, wrote to all the Worcestershire authorities inviting Council leaders in the area to develop a proposal for single tier reorganisation in exercise of powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The timetable imposed by the Government required interim proposals to be submitted by 21st March 2025 and final proposals by 28th November 2025.

An extraordinary Council meeting was held on 12th March 2025 when an interim plan was agreed that covered two main options for unitarisation. One of the options considered at this meeting was for a single unitary authority for the county of Worcestershire with the alternative option being two unitary authorities covering north and south Worcestershire.

At the extraordinary Council meeting it was determined to agree the interim plan for submission and to further explore the options. On that basis Bromsgrove District Council along with the Councils of Redditch Borough, Worcester City, Malvern Hills District and Wychavon District agreed to commission consultants to carry out an options appraisal. The company, Mutual Ventures, secured the commission to undertake the options appraisal.

Members were informed that there were six criteria under which the Government would assess LGR proposals. These were as follows:

1. The establishment of a single tier of local government.
2. That unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improved capacity and withstand financial shocks.
3. Prioritisation of the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
4. How Councils in the area had sought to work together in coming to a view that met local needs and was informed by local views.
5. The support of devolution arrangements.
6. How new unitary structures enabled stronger community engagement and delivered genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

The approach taken in appraising each option was to consider against the Government's six LGR criteria qualitative and quantitative information. The qualitative information was acquired through thirty-two engagement sessions, a County-wide public survey and staff surveys.

The Leader explained that the Local Government Reorganisation Report - Mutual Ventures provided design principles based on the outputs from the engagement sessions for what good might look like in terms of local government in Worcestershire in the future. In addition to this, the report provided feedback on the public survey entitled "Shape Worcestershire", which noted a preference for two authorities covering the north and south of the County. Members were informed that the preference for two authorities was also the view provided by staff who completed the staff survey at Bromsgrove District and Redditch Borough Councils.

A summary of performance for each of the options against the Government's six LGR criteria was contained within the report. The Leader reported that as set out by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, in his letter of 5th February 2025, the six criteria were further divided into twenty-one other elements. The

summary looked at the probability, with scores of high, medium and low or unclear of each option meeting the individual criteria.

During the presentation of the report the headlines were outlined as followed: -

- All options delivered a single tier of Local Government. Options A and B2 had a high probability of prioritising the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens. Option B2 offered the dynamic of operating at size and scale for large services such as adults and children services whilst being able to also deliver place based services at the locality level. Both options B1 and B2 offered a higher probability than option A of being able to deliver to meet local needs as informed by local views.
- Option A achieved significant savings but was believed to perform less well in terms of empowering local communities and meeting people's expectations/views in terms of what kind of local authority they wanted to serve them and their local area.
- Whilst Option B1 with Option B2 gave a higher probability of providing stronger local community engagement/neighbourhood empowerment than Option A it delivered the least efficiencies of all of the options and included the risks and costs of disaggregating adults and children's services.
- Under Option B2, adults and children services were not disaggregated, and place services remained focussed on localities and prevention. This option whilst making more savings than Option B1 did not perform as well as Option A in respect of efficiencies. However, it performed better than Option A in respect of the probability of empowering local communities and meeting people's expectations/views in terms of what kind of local authority they wanted to serve them and their local area.

Following the presentation of the report it was suggested that all options be debated, prior to the proposal of the recommendations contained within the report. However, Members suggested that a recommendation be proposed and debated accordingly. Therefore, Councillor K. May proposed Option B along with the other recommendations as written in the report. This was seconded by Councillor S. Baxter.

During the consideration of the report the following areas were discussed in detail by Members:

- If Option A were to be agreed, although it might provide financial savings, local democracy might be compromised resulting in the loss of localism for residents of Bromsgrove. It was suggested that Bromsgrove had little in common with the south of the County and therefore Option B, and specifically Option B2, would be the preferred option for LGR. It was noted that the majority of the responses received as part of the consultation process had indicated that it was the preference to establish two unitary authorities: one in the North and one in the South of the County. Further exploration of this option would provide more detailed information on the efficiency and savings of Option B including shared services whilst delivering best value for the local residents and taxpayers. It was also noted that two unitary authorities would provide the scale to deliver the necessary services whilst still providing the close proximity to residents and a deep understanding of local needs. Each area within the County had distinct communities with different pressures and priorities. The numbers of residents per elected Member within a one unitary model would be significantly higher than that of two unitary authorities, which again could result in a lesser connection between residents and elected Members.
- Members noted that there was no support for joining with Birmingham City Council as part of the LGR process. If, in the future, there was a necessity to establish a Strategic Authority, there were several Councils that could be combined, such as Hereford or Warwickshire who shared similar demographics to a North and South Worcestershire model.
- It was noted that there was a lack of support for two unitary Authorities by at least one of the Councils within Worcestershire. Would this affect how Bromsgrove could move forward with its investigation into Option B, if this was the option agreed by Full Council at this meeting? It was reported that this would not limit the investigation of Option B as ultimately the decision for LGR lay with central Government following its consideration of all of the evidence provided Bromsgrove District Council, and any other Council within Worcestershire who were in agreement with pursuing Option B.
- It was noted that, according to the Government guidelines, the population within a new unitary authority should be approximately five hundred thousand residents. If Option B were to be agreed this would result in approximately two hundred and ninety thousand residents within a North Worcestershire unitary authority. It was reported that there was precedence of this size of

unitary authority currently, such as Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and the City of Wolverhampton Council.

- It was key to look at the provision of Adult Social Care, Children's and SEND Services for any option of local government for the future. Particularly as these areas would have a significant financial impact on any structure of local government. Members suggested that pressure would need to be placed on the Government in order to find a suitable outcome for these services for the future.
- Members were keen to recognise that there was the potential for some services to suffer as a result of LGR, such as homelessness services. It was imperative that the most vulnerable residents within the County be provided with adequate services following the implementation of LGR.
- It was raised how transformation would be included in the continuing work of the consultants involved in looking into future options for LGR. Members were informed that once all decisions had been made by Councils within the County in terms of the preferred option going forward, the Councils in agreement would meet to discuss the plans for the future. Alongside the work undertaken by Mutual Ventures there was the need to carry out further investigations from an accountancy perspective to provide a deeper financial understanding of what any potential option might look like. Members raised whether there would be a specific Cabinet role implemented whose responsibility was to oversee LGR. It was noted that there was already work underway to look at the potential of establishing a sub-committee of the Cabinet to oversee this area of responsibility for the duration of LGR.
- The potential for Community Committees to be explored as part of LGR and the possibility that this might enable residents to be closer to the process of local democracy. Some Members felt that this was an exciting prospect. It was also noted that Parish Councils had a part to play in LGR and that support for them during this time should be ongoing.

Members thanked the Officers and Mutual Ventures for the hard work that had gone into the preparation of the evidence driven report and detailed consultation that had taken place.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **The matters set out in the report and the findings of the Options Appraisal carried out by Mutual Ventures; and appendices associated with the Mutual Ventures report**

listed within their report as Appendix A - Financial modelling and assumptions, Appendix B – Shape Worcestershire: outputs from public engagement, staff surveys and focus groups and Appendix C – Place profiles be noted:

- 2) The following model of Local Government re-organisation be selected as the Council's preferred option to be progressed to be developed into the final proposals for submission to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government by the deadline of 28th November 2025:

OPTION B: Two Unitary Authorities made up of North Worcestershire (covering Bromsgrove District, Redditch Borough and Wyre Forest District) and South Worcestershire (covering Malvern Hills District, Worcester City and Wychavon District) providing the former district/borough and county council local government services for each area;

- 3) having selected Option B, that Members instruct officers:-
- a) to undertake further analysis and development of the option selected under Recommendation 2 above;
 - b) to bring back to Members at an extraordinary Council meeting in November a set of final proposals for their consideration representing the Council's draft submission on Local Government Reorganisation; and
 - c) In recognition of the requirement to collaborate with other authorities when putting forward plans for Local Government Reorganisation, to work with the Leader of this Council and Leader or Leaders of any other authorities which have chosen the same option to develop joint final proposals for consideration at the meeting referred to in recommendation 3(b);

- 4) To delegate authority to the Chief Executive following consultation with the Leader to work with other councils and consultants as necessary; and
- 5) to agree a supplementary budget estimate of up to £100,000 to allow further work on the Council's proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. This is in two tranches of firstly £50,000 with a second tranche of £50,000 to be drawn only if required, under authority delegated to the Chief Executive following consultation with the Leader of the Council.

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TO CONSIDER ANY URGENT BUSINESS, DETAILS OF WHICH HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED TO THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR 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

Councillor C. Hotham raised that a £1.4million overspend had been identified at the Nailer's Yard site and queried why this matter could not be discussed under this item during this meeting.

The Monitoring Officer explained that the decision in respect of the funding for this site had been taken in line with the Council's urgency procedure rules and that this matter would be reported retrospectively to Full Council at its next ordinary meeting in line with standard process.

The meeting closed at 6.49 p.m.

Chairman