

REORGANISATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Executive Summary

This brief report seeks Executive approval to enable the Council to respond to forthcoming proposals in respect of the Government White Paper on Devolution and Local Government.

It is probable that some form of unitary authority arrangement will come into effect in the medium term. Whether it is a single authority for Surrey or two or three authorities remains uncertain. Whichever occurs it will be important to secure the ability for local people to shape their place and address local issues. Local Town and Parish Councils that provide for that local voice through elected representatives serve many areas of Surrey; Woking does not have any representation at that level.

Surrey County Council is pursuing a proposal to establish a single unitary authority; Borough and District Councils are jointly investigating appropriate unitary arrangements.

The Executive is requested to note the current work in respect of unitary authority arrangements, note the £30,000 use of contingency approved under delegated authority to facilitate joint work with other Borough and District Councils and authorise preparations for a Governance Review to establish a Town Council and/or Town and Parish Councils.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the current work in respect of unitary authority arrangements be noted;
- (ii) the use of £30,000 of contingency approved under delegated authority be noted; and
- (iii) preparations be made for a Governance Review and reported to Council for approval at its meeting on 15 October 2020.

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To enable the Council to respond to the proposals for unitary authorities.

The Executive has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Reorganisation of Local Government

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, Simon Clarke MP, opened the discussion on the reorganisation of Local Government at the virtual Local Government Association Conference held on 3 July 2020. Attached, at Appendix 1, is an extract from his statement to the Conference.
- 1.2 The Government is due to issue a White Paper on “Recovery and Devolution” in the autumn. There is much speculation about what it will contain but the consistent message is that there will be opportunities to put forward proposals for Unitary Council(s).

2.0 Surrey County Council Position

- 2.1 In a publication to all Surrey residents, mainly about Coronavirus, under the heading “Keeping Surrey Safe”, Surrey County Council has publicly stated its intention to pursue a Single Unitary Council for Surrey under the banner “Making Surrey Fit for the Future”. Subsequently the County Council has evolved this message to “One Surrey Together”. Attached, at Appendix 2, is a copy of the slides to its Members.

3.0 Borough and District Position

- 3.1 Borough and District Council Leaders have discussed how they should respond to the proposal for a Single Unitary Council. A number of Boroughs and District have passed resolutions against a single unitary, however collectively they have agreed to undertake a programme of work to review the business case for future organisational arrangements across Surrey. Runnymede Borough Council is leading the commissioning of a consultancy firm to undertake the development of a business case and Elmbridge Borough Council is leading the commissioning of a communications consultant.
- 3.2 The work with Surrey Borough and District Councils will have regard to the work done by the District Council Network (DCN). Attached at Appendix 3 is a report issued by DCN entitled “Power in Place: devolution and districts driving our recovery”. Attached at Appendix 4 is the briefing note issued by DCN for Members of Parliament.

4.0 Woking Borough Council Position

- 4.1 Whilst exploring options for Unitary Council arrangements it will be important to ensure that any solution, including a single unitary authority, provides for effective “Place Making” and for “local representation”. Many parts of Surrey have Parish and/or Town Councils that could form the platform of more local representation under any unitary arrangement. Woking does not have any Parish or Town Councils.
- 4.2 If the residents of Woking are to maintain a voice in shaping their future at a local level, the Council should consider the creation of Parish or Town Councils with a wide range of delegated powers.
- 4.3 The Borough Council has the legal powers necessary to establish a Parish or Town Council but must undertake a Governance Review. The Governance Review must examine whether to create one or more parish councils to ensure that local government arrangements are effective, convenient and reflect the identities and interests of the community in the area. In conducting the review, the Council must consult local electors and any other persons or bodies that the Council considers to have an interest in the review.
- 4.4 It is proposed that the Council should undertake a Governance Review in the context of a Unitary Council, with a view to replacing the Borough Council level with a “Town Council” and/or a core Town Council and some Parish Councils.

- 4.5 If supported by the Executive, Officers will prepare a report to Council at its meeting on 15 October 2020 for approval.

5.0 Implications

Financial

- 5.1 The Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, approved a budgetary provision of £30,000 as Woking Borough Council's contribution to the joint work.
- 5.2 The cost of undertaking a Governance Review is to be assessed and will be reported to Council when it is requested to approve a Governance Review.

Human Resource/Training and Development

- 5.3 The work on addressing the unitary authority issue will require additional resources through the employment of consultants and place an additional burden on existing resources.

Community Safety

- 5.4 There are no community safety issues raised by this report.

Risk Management

- 5.5 There are no risk management issues raised by this report.

Sustainability

- 5.6 There are no sustainability issues raised by this report.

Equalities

- 5.7 There are no equalities issues raised by this report.

Safeguarding

- 5.8 There are no safeguarding issues raised by this report.

6.0 Consultations

- 6.1 There have been no public consultations undertaken in the preparation of this report.
- 6.2 There have been consultations between the Leaders and Chief Executives of Borough and District Councils.

REPORT ENDS

**Extract from Statement on 3 July 2020 by Simon Clarke MP
Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government**

Devolution and Local Government

“Over the past few years, this government, in lockstep with council leaders, have commenced the most ambitious devolution agenda in over 70 years.

We have made great breakthroughs and the Parliamentary Order laid literally just this week to unlock £900 million of investment for the Sheffield City Region while a new devolution deal, including over £1.1 billion of investment for West Yorkshire, was agreed and announced at Budget.

Once that new Mayor is elected in West Yorkshire, 41% of residents in England will be served by directly elected city region mayors, who each have the powers to stimulate job creation, build homes, improve transport and reduce local carbon emissions.

In the North of England, that figure rises to 63%, with strong and effective Metro Mayors like Andy Burnham in Manchester and my friend Ben Houchen in the Tees Valley acting as powerful ambassadors for their regions. Well now is the time to finish what we've started.

I am delighted to confirm today that this government will be pressing ahead with the publication of our white paper on devolution and local recovery this autumn.

The white paper will connect local recovery with levelling up...

Providing a place-based strategy to boost regional economic performance in every corner of the country, from the Northern Powerhouse and the Midlands Engine to the Western Gateway and the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

Our transformative plan will include a clear, ambitious strategy for strengthening our local institutions...

With many more elected mayors and more unitary councils following in the footsteps of Dorset, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire.

So that we can remove the complexity of governance and reduce costs to the taxpayer while making space for town and parish councils to be genuinely empowered.

I'm acutely aware of the vital contribution that town and parish councils make to everyday life, whether it's keeping public toilets open, running car parks or maintaining natural spaces which have been a lifeline to many throughout this time.

And I appreciate that there is a wealth of ideas to support the future of local government, devolution and its role in our national recovery. This includes the LGA Re-thinking Local Report and it's only appropriate that we take the time to consider the series of important offers and asks that it makes of government.

More broadly my door is always open to those of you who I know will have ideas and reflections after long service in the sector and I want to take all of those into account.

The British state needs to become fully match-fit for the future.

Reorganisation of Local Government

I believe it's right, as we work with you to remove the local barriers to recovery, that we shift power from Whitehall to people on the ground who know their areas so well, understand their priorities, and are empowered with the mandate, levers and agency to act upon them.

That is what our white paper on devolution and local recovery will seek to achieve, and I really do look forward to discussing it with you in more detail later in the year.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly dealt a heavy blow to our regional economies but it's also underlined the reality that an overly centralised state is not, and never will be, best placed to respond effectively to the challenges that individual communities face.

I am not dogmatic on these issues, and we will always be led by the evidence.

Clearly, as we evolve a robust outcomes-led assessment framework will be key to our wider strategy.

But my own experience as an MP from the devolved region gives me great confidence that our national recovery should be founded upon our local endeavours."